

TWO DOWN, ONE TO GO

Brian Topp

The New Democratic Party of Canada won 103 seats in the 2011 campaign — 59 of them in Quebec. It was an overnight success that had been a decade in the making. A fundamentally positive message proved to be right for the times. A long-term bet in Quebec finally paid off. Jack Layton played his cards well in the leadership debates. And now a final task remains — to persuade English Canadians that the NDP shows up to govern when it is elected: it is a party fit for federal office. Senior NDP strategist Brian Topp gives us a privileged view from inside the Layton campaign.



Coup de théâtre : le Nouveau Parti démocratique a raflé 103 sièges au soir des élections, dont 59 au Québec. Mais ce qui semble un exploit inattendu est en réalité le fruit d'une décennie d'efforts. Le message fondamentalement positif du NPD, qui tombait à pic en cette période d'incertitude, a fait le reste. En misant à long terme sur le Québec, Jack Layton aura donc gagné son pari après avoir fait bonne figure lors des débats des chefs. Sa prochaine tâche : convaincre le Canada anglais que son parti est en mesure de gouverner le pays lorsqu'il est élu. Le stratège du NPD Brian Topp dresse de l'intérieur un bilan de la campagne de Jack Layton.

At the start of the 2011 election, three barriers stood between Jack Layton and the Prime Minister's Office: the Bloc Québécois, the Liberal Party of Canada and the Conservative Party of Canada. Two down, one to go. The New Democrats have vaulted over all of their opponents on the opposition bench and now face the Conservatives as their mainstream alternative. Pretty good progress for one election campaign.

As Tommy Douglas used to say, good things come in trinities. And so in this article I'm going to offer you a few preliminary notes on three aspects of Layton's remarkable 2011 campaign. First, the core message underpinning that campaign, and why it may have been well-timed. Second, Quebec. And third, a little briefly, the debates. Followed by a few final thoughts.

First, the message.

In February 2011 Jack Layton met with Prime Minister Harper to pitch a set of budget proposals. Layton was serious about those proposals in more ways than one. Had Harper adopted them as presented, the NDP would likely have voted to support the resulting new "NDP budget," in the style of Layton's 2005 accord with Paul Martin. But if Harper didn't accept substantially all of Layton's proposals, then there was probably going to be an election. Layton was walking a fine line in all of this — building on his brand as the opposition leader committed to working constructively in Parliament, without committing the Liberal mistake of supporting a Conservative government unconditionally.

Layton's supporters, his party and his caucus like making progress in Parliament, but they would not tolerate keeping Stephen Harper in office in return for nothing.

Harper's government made its intentions clear, publicly and privately. There would be some token gestures in Layton's direction, but his proposals were going to be rejected.

Shortly after this became clear, I dropped in on NDP national campaign director Brad Lavigne. We crossed the street to Eggspectations and turned our minds once again, over plates of eggs and toast, to Jack Layton's next campaign.

Jack Layton's 103-seat win in the 2011 election is an overnight success that had been a decade in the making. One of the key elements of Layton's success was the remarkable continuity of his election team. Layton's people — campaign director Lavigne, chief of staff Anne McGrath, Quebec campaign director Raymond Guardia and the many young, talented unit leaders who reported to them — were going into their fourth election together. They knew each other well, had been discussing strategy and tactics on a weekly conference call and many other meetings since 2003. At a rough estimate, 300 weekly calls; hundreds of other formal and informal meetings; more than a thousand hours of careful discussion about winning federal elections.

And now, informed by all of that work, Lavigne and I were talking about a *Globe and Mail* story that we didn't like.

That article anticipated the coming election and summarized the central campaign pitches of the

Conservatives, the Liberals and the New Democrats.

The Conservatives, the *Globe* speculated, would run on the argument that economic recovery required a stable majority government. The Liberals would run on the argument that Canada needed to set better priorities — less for corporate tax cuts and military equipment, more for pensions, education and health care (a

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direct, calculated crib by the Liberals of the 2008 NDP campaign). And the NDP? Clearly, the journalist was struggling to sum up the NDP message. He took a crack at it: Jack Layton would argue that the Liberals were not to be trusted.

What we had here, we agreed over the toast, was a failure to communicate.

The New Democrats were not getting across a clear, concise summary of the coming campaign, and so risked being eclipsed by the Liberals on the NDP's own ground.

Apprentice political staff who go to work for the Saskatchewan NDP are taught to “never return to the scene of victory.” Learning from this wisdom, the New Democrats weren't inclined to re-run the 2008 campaign. It had yielded 37 seats. The party wanted more. Further, the Liberals had appropriated it in an attempt to crack the NDP vote (as it would turn out, earning them just about exactly as many seats in 2011 as it got the New Democrats in 2008).

So what, then, was the campaign about, in a short sentence? Say, in a 140-character sentence? What was our “Tweet”?

What we needed, Lavigne said, was a message that put the Conservatives, the Liberals and the Bloc together in a box as the problem, not the solution. We needed to speak to, and show affinity with, the public's views about federal politics. Their disdain for the antics

in question period. Their growing view that none of these parties — notably, for our initial purposes, the Liberals and the Bloc — were capable of getting anything positive done.

“Ottawa is broken,” I offered.

Lavigne liked it. That was a phrase that we could hang a lot of argument on. That the Conservatives and

Liberals were both responsible for driving the national government into the ground; eroding people's pensions and security; letting health care fade away; resting satisfied with a petro-economy with high unemployment, rising cost of living, lower incomes.

But, Lavigne said, it isn't good enough to complain about problems. The Conservatives and Liberals were likely to wage brutally negative campaigns against each other. The Conservatives had already been doing so for months, pouring millions of dollars of attack ads on the head of Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff. All that negative campaigning was going to turn voters off, potentially creating an opportunity for the NDP.

Lavigne pointed to the research. According to our focus groups and polling, what Canadians liked most about Jack Layton was his willingness to work with others and to focus on getting things done — his essentially positive approach to politics and a perfect counterpoint to what Canadians were going to hear from the other parties. That needed to be in the “tweet” too.

“Ottawa is broken,” Lavigne said, “and we're going to fix it!”

And so there it was, our campaign tweet.

“Ottawa is broken and we're going to fix it” was, to be honest about it, not really a great piece of political writing. It figured prominently in many of Layton's

early campaign speeches, but Lavigne and his talented speech-writing team soon replaced it with more compelling drafting, like Layton's signature “and I won't give up until the job is done!” (or: I...WON'T...give-up...until... the job...IS DONE!), as many journalists would chant along with him).

Still, I think it nicely summarizes the NDP campaign's underlying narrative — the one it would stick with throughout the campaign. What Layton was going to suggest in this campaign was that the status quo in Ottawa was getting Canada nowhere. And

that Layton, using his well-known skills as a negotiator and coalition-builder, was the guy to be trusted to get things moving again.

“The politics of proposition” is how Jack Layton thinks of it.

Consider how this played out in the NDP's advertising. The Conservatives and the Liberals filled the airwaves with angry attack ads urging Canadians not to vote for each other. What the NDP offered was a series of ads designed to introduce a problem, with a smile (“Great Canadian Moments,” followed by an animated, almost Monty Pythonesque problem statement), switching to live video of Layton proposing a clear, easy-to-understand solution. These were predominantly negative ads, but they looked like positive ones — Layton was proposing something. The angry ads from the blues and the reds, combined with these messages from the orange team, seemed to work nicely together, pushing centrist and progressive voters to Layton.

A friend working on the Conservative campaign acknowledged this a little ruefully about midway through the campaign. “Maybe the opposition vote is like a balloon, and all we've been doing is pushing down on half of it, making it pop up on the other side,” he said. Just so, as it turned out.

So then, Quebec. Canadians interested in federal politics aren't used

to thinking about Quebec anymore. But that will now radically change, perhaps the single best piece of news to emerge from this election. Our country is starting to heal from the bitter divisions of the 1980s and 1990s, as measured in the dramatic drop in support for the Parti Québécois' federal

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sock puppet, and a dramatic increase in support for the New Democrats and for what they have to offer in Quebec instead.

Which is what, exactly?

New Democrats have been working to fulfill a set of bets for many years now. A key one is the strategic bet, magnificently realized in this election, that many Quebecers — perhaps most Quebecers — can find a comfortable home in the NDP.

The NDP was relaunched in roughly its current form in 1961. It bears remembering that at the time, Quebec was represented by 50 extremely unhappy Union Nationale members sitting in Parliament as Diefenbaker Conservatives. Dief was a smarter prime minister than he is usually given credit for (he was right and Pearson was wrong on nuclear weapons, for example). But, to indulge in understatement, he was no Brian Mulroney when it came to skillfully and successfully working with a francophone Quebec caucus. The NDP's refounders — David Lewis, Tommy Douglas and many others — saw their opportunity. So they thought carefully about the emerging modern Quebec.

What were they thinking?

First, they believed that Quebecers share a number of fundamental common interests with other Canadians. Economic security and opportunity. Public health care. Education and training. The environment. The reduction of poverty and inequality. The rights of women. Culture. Peace, and Canada's good name in the world. A federal government committed

to making progress on issues like these could command wide support among both French- and English-speaking Canadians, New Democrats have always believed — an excellent way to build a real national party and a real national government. And to knit Canada together more solidly, based on sinews of com-

mon values and shared goals.

Second, the NDP's refounders understood many of the issues dominating politics in Quebec in the 20th century to be civil, workers' and human rights issues — none more so than the right of francophone Quebecers to live and work in their own language.

Third, New Democrats took a flexible and pragmatic approach to pursuing national priorities in Quebec. Particularly in areas of exclusive provincial jurisdiction, they were open to arrangements in Quebec that would work in and for that province.

Finally, working from the principles of their re-founders, New Democrats have walked a careful line on the brutally controversial and divisive constitutional wars that riveted Canada in the 1980s and 1990s. New Democrats support charters of rights — the government of Saskatchewan introduced a provincial one under Tommy Douglas in 1947. But Jack Layton spoke thoughtfully about the current state of play on these issues at the federal level during the 2011 campaign. The Quebec National Assembly has not ratified the 1982 federal Charter of Rights, Layton noted. That is an unfinished piece of national business that is going to have to be addressed and resolved — when we can be sure of success. (Oddly, some of the Parti Québécois' dimmer avatars attacked this position during the election. This must have upset their leader, Pauline Marois, since Layton's approach is essentially identical, as strategy, to her

view that another referendum on breaking up Canada should only be held when it has a good chance to succeed. With supporters like that, small wonder Marois has been struggling.)

Does all of this make the NDP a Quebec separatist party? Were these "promises that cannot be kept" or a fraud perpetrated on francophone Quebecers? Does Her Majesty's new Official Opposition carry within it the seeds of its own destruction? The usual suspects in English Canada and in Quebec have been saying so.

But a fair look might reveal that, in fact, the New Democrats are — and have always been — practical-minded Pearsonian federalists in an honourable nation-building tradition whose time may have come again. That means New Democrats want Canada to return to issues that Quebecers and other Canadians are likely to find common ground on — and not to issues likely to divide them. And that means New Democrats have always been and remain pragmatists in terms of finding a way forward — much like Prime Minister Pearson himself. Working closely in Parliament with Tommy Douglas, Pearson found a way forward on unifying national issues like pension security (complete with the CPP and QPP). Similar arrangements are common coin in the modern Canadian labour movement. Perhaps, the NDP submits, there is a model there we can learn from on other issues, when appropriate.

In addition to upsetting former Péquiste communications staffers of a certain ilk, this has attracted fire from Liberal partisans, eager to redeploy constitutional wedge issues that might work for them in Toronto and then, perhaps, elsewhere. In this, the NDP's Liberal critics are behaving like Layton's dimmer PQ critics — they too are attacking a key thread of their own history and their own traditions, in the cause of a *pur et dur* approach.

Which brings us to the good part, from the perspective of the orange team.



The Gazette, Montreal

Jack Layton is swarmed by supporters at his April 23 rally in Gilles Duceppe's own riding in Montreal. An overnight success that was a decade in the making, the NDP orange wave would rise to 59 seats, and would take out Duceppe in his own riding by 5,000 votes.

As the 2011 election demonstrated in both Bloc Québécois and Liberal ridings, Quebecers — French-speaking and English-speaking Quebecers, *pur laine* and *nouveau québécois* — turned out to be of a mind to turn the page on both of the ancient warring tribes that used to prosper by polarizing and dividing them.

Which is a big part of why, I submit, the New Democrats went into the 2011 election campaign as the second choice of most Quebecers.

Voters were bored with the BQ/PQ, and were looking for an alternative to their constitutional obsessions. They weren't feeling any warmer about the Liberals for, fundamentally, the same reasons (and because of enduring embarrassment over the sponsorship scandal. And the way the Liberals played their cards between 1980 and 1984. And the Charest effect. And the Ignatieff effect. And more...). Quebecers also over-

whelmingly rejected the values and priorities of the Harper government.

All of which set up a remarkable opportunity for Jack Layton and his team.

And as it happened, they had put themselves in a position to take advantage of it.

How?

To answer that question, let's first briefly trace the career of 2011 Quebec campaign director Raymond Guardia. Guardia, I can testify, was recruited as a painfully young-looking teenager by Ed Broadbent and his team. Consistent with the NDP playbook, he was flown all around Canada in the 1980s to learn his trade as an organizer, working in a number of provincial campaigns under the mentorship of experienced campaign leaders. This gave him the grounding he needed to work in Quebec in 1988 as the campaign manager in the riding of Chambly — where Phil

Edmonston was going to take a serious run for office under Broadbent's banner.

Much interesting local political history ensued, leading to a by-election in the same riding in 1989. Guardia managed the campaign again. Phil Edmonston ran again. And this time he was elected with over 60 percent of the vote — becoming the NDP's first elected member of Parliament.

Critics dismissed this as a personal victory and a fluke. But the party's organizers took a different view. They noted how well voters in that suburban and rural Quebec riding, overwhelmingly francophone then and now, were responding to the basic NDP value proposition that I have sketched out above.

Alas, Meech Lake intervened.

Much additional interesting history ensued, agonizingly analyzed in the pages of this magazine and elsewhere for many years.

Guardia stuck with the NDP in Quebec, as did a brave core team. They hung in and were therefore on hand in 2004, when Jack Layton took over the party and returned seriously to the challenge of building the NDP in Quebec.

Dief was a smarter prime minister than he is usually given credit for (he was right and Pearson was wrong on nuclear weapons, for example). But, to indulge in understatement, he was no Brian Mulroney when it came to skillfully and successfully working with a francophone Quebec caucus. The NDP's refounders — David Lewis, Tommy Douglas and many others — saw their opportunity. So they thought carefully about the emerging modern Quebec.

Joined by a steadily strengthening crowd attracted by Layton (a number of them are now members of Parliament), Guardia returned to his work with the party. He worked in the 2004 federal election campaign as part of the debate preparation team, and began to play a more important role in the NDP's councils — chairing the 2006 federal NDP convention in Quebec City.

That convention reiterated the NDP's pitch to Quebecers.

Guardia was therefore available to the party when Jack Layton succeeded in recruiting Tom Mulcair to run for the NDP, and an opportunity opened via a by-election in the riding of Outremont. Mulcair had been prepping to run in Laval. He was persuaded to try his luck in Outremont instead. Guardia served as campaign manager. And, as is well known, Mulcair crushed his Liberal opponent, taking the riding in an impressive campaign rooted in his appeal as a candidate, in Layton's appeal as leader and in the party's offer to Quebec sketched out here.

Fast-forward to 2011.

Jack Layton now appointed Guardia to be Quebec campaign director — with a wide mandate to craft a winning campaign for the whole province around Layton's popularity, Mulcair's high profile and the party's increasingly attractive offer.

There is a lot to be said about what happened then. But for our purposes here, let's say this: as Guardia's career as a volunteer and organizer demonstrates,

Layton's campaign was not an overnight effort or an alien plant. It was built on the foundation of over 20 years of effort and benefited from a core organizing team who understood francophone Quebec voters intimately, and had run winning

campaigns in rural, suburban and urban Quebec before. That bench strength was reflected throughout Layton's 2011 campaign in Quebec — in its savvy advertising campaign; in its ability to manoeuvre successfully in the Quebec media; in the significant strength and depth of its slate of candidates, soon to be revealed in the new Parliament; in the visibility campaign that wallpapered so much of the province orange; in the symbolism and chutzpah (verging on effrontery on occasion, not in a bad way) in which the Quebec NDP team challenged both the BQ and the Liberals in their core fortresses and clobbered both of them, in both official languages. Much of this had been prototyped in the NDP's 2007 by-election victory in Outremont. And it all worked acceptably well in the 2011 campaign — in no small part because of one additional factor: *le bon Jack Layton*.

Let's remain in the realm of understatement: Layton clicked with Quebec voters in 2011. It was a connection that went well beyond the party's thoughtful positioning on the issues or the cool professionalism of its campaign. It was an example of the indefinable magic that can happen in politics, and that people in politics are always looking to generate — usually unsuccessfully.

Having taken an increasingly close look at him over three previous federal campaigns, Quebecers just plain decided that they liked Jack Layton — a lot.

They liked his cane and his fortitude. It reminded them of some of

what impressed them about Lucien Bouchard.

They liked his obvious love for his tiny granddaughter and his family.

They liked the moustache and the hair and the warm smile — so reminiscent of favourite uncles and grandfathers in a culture that still has a lot of room for warm families.

They liked Layton's French. In a culture attuned to the messages sent by accents (like many European cultures), Quebecers got the message being sent by Layton's — his was a friendly, working-class Quebec French spoken in common-sense tones. It told them he was at home when he was campaigning in Quebec.

They liked his appearances on popular television shows. They liked his fearlessness in debating Gilles Duceppe. They liked that he was something new, and not from the Bloc, the Liberals or the Tories.

And they liked his message — which is, as it has always been from the NDP, respectful of Quebecers, honest about the issues (including being honest that some of them are difficult and divisive) and focused on working together to make progress on the issues that people care about most, in both official languages.

Which brings us to the last thing to say about the NDP's campaign in Quebec, which is this: in many ways, the 2008 coalition crisis in Ottawa set up that campaign, provided it with its theme and was Layton's winning entrée to the province.

Layton's proposal to the Liberals in 2008, suggesting that the two parties team up to replace the Conservatives in the last Parliament with the support of the Bloc, wasn't a big hit in English Canada. But it was very popular indeed in the province of Quebec. Harper's views on culture, justice, overseas military engagements and many other issues have made him and his government deeply unpopular east of the Ottawa River.



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Layton's (possibly a little cheeky) attempt to oust Harper and to replace him with a progressive alternative was therefore an excellent sell in Quebec. It showed an open-mindedness and a willingness to work with others to get things done. Those events transformed Layton into a senior national figure in the eyes of francophone Quebecers, and a source of hope that change is possible. It got them to thinking about playing a positive role rather than a defensive one in federal governance. In other words, the 2008 coalition helped shake Quebecers loose from their prior boycott of federal politics.

In that sense, the Bloc Québécois' support for Layton's initiative in 2008 was part of their ultimate undoing.

And Michal Ignatieff's move to renege on that coalition, his decision to prop up Harper in office between 2008 and 2011, and his repudiation of coalition politics in the 2011 election, helped drive the Liberal vote into single digits across francophone Quebec — a helpful contribution to bringing change in that province, for which all Canadians should be grateful.

Layton's Quebec campaign slogan — "travaillons ensemble" (let's work together) was a direct reference to what Quebecers liked most about the 2008 coalition.

They liked that slogan. They liked him. They liked his campaign. And so they gave him 59 MPs with very healthy pluralities indeed — the foundation of his new caucus, and the foundation of the same electoral base (teamed up with strong NDP deputations from Ontario and every other province but two) that the Liberal Party used to work from to succeed in federal politics for a century.

So then, to the debates. I'll embarrass Brad Lavigne once more and report that at the beginning of the second week of the 2011 campaign he called me up with the following question. "We're at 13 per cent in Nanos,"

he said. "Is that normal in every [expletive deleted] federal campaign?"

Hopefully not any more. But yes, alas, in recent history.

In 2004, in 2006 and in 2008 the NDP vote seemed to swoon in the first week and in the last three days. It was doing so again in the early going in 2011, probably for the same reasons. Media attention in English Canada was again focusing on the reds and the blues. Ignatieff, in particular, had launched his campaign with a tactical voting pitch aimed squarely at core NDP voters, reinforced through an election platform designed to echo the NDP's 2008 propos-

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als. The writ had dropped a week earlier than the orange team had expected, and so the leader's tour was scrambling a bit — reflected in an underwhelming first week on the road for Layton.

What to do? Lavigne had injected a big dose of energy into the campaign's tour planning, which responded with a series of sparkling events in the second week that better showcased Layton. These would help reconsolidate the NDP vote in public domain polls. But what the NDP campaign was then going to need to do was to change the game. And the opportunity to do so was going to be during the leaders' debates scheduled for the third week of the campaign.

I have written elsewhere about how the NDP team worked with

Layton to prepare for those debates (in the *globeandmail.com's* "second reading" section, if you're curious). So let's focus on the strategy and the outcome.

Layton needed to knock Michael Ignatieff out of the election in those debates and then to step forward as the principal alternative to Harper.

He needed to do this because Ignatieff's campaign strategists were aiming much of their effort at the NDP, seeking to talk the NDP's vote down into the single digits — an existential threat to the orange team. Liberal apologists have since scolded Layton for being mean to Ignatieff. But they can't have it both ways. The red team can't explicitly target the NDP in an election with the goal of eradicating its caucus and appropriating its vote (not really friendly goals, all in all), and then expect, as an entitlement, that the NDP will be helpful to the Liberals during the same campaign.

Having your cake and eating it too might be what you grow up to expect in Rosedale, but it doesn't work that way in politics.

As it happened, Ignatieff was what Americans might call a "target-rich environment." To be specific, he was constructing his attack on Stephen Harper on the basis that Harper was not respectful of Canadian democracy and our parliamentary system. But Ignatieff himself was no respecter of Parliament — his was the worst attendance record of the 308 MPs in the House.

This seemed to the NDP campaign to be a good symbol of Ignatieff's many inconsistencies and contradictions. Ignatieff was presenting himself as the only alternative to Harper — having propped him up in Parliament unconditionally. Ignatieff was also asserting that Harper's policies were un-Canadian and dangerous to the country — yet, when we get to the details, he supported and proposed to continue substantially all of them. And Ignatieff would later urge Canadians to "rise up" against the Conservatives — but when he had the opportunity to do so him-

self in 2008, he reneged on his own signature and proved to be Harper's best friend in the House.

The two minutes or so in the 2011 English debate where Layton took on Ignatieff on these issues (as symbolized by the theme that people who don't show up for work don't usually get a promotion; perhaps Ignatieff should learn his job as an MP before expecting to be

The two minutes or so in the 2011 English debate where Layton took on Ignatieff on these issues (as symbolized by the theme that people who don't show up for work don't usually get a promotion; perhaps Ignatieff should learn his job as an MP before expecting to be elected PM) were the defining moments of those debates.

elected PM) were the defining moments of those debates. They were the game-changer the NDP campaign was looking for — the moment when the Liberal Party's narcissism, its sense of entitlement, its contradictions and lack of candor about its intentions and priorities, came home to roost. The Liberals believed that the office of prime minister was an entry-level job that a Harvard professor and BBC presenter could drop into without any experience in politics (or as an executive in any other role), if only he was a Liberal. Faced with a skilled, experienced, focused and tough opponent in Layton, Ignatieff crumpled in front of one of the largest television audiences ever to watch a federal debate.

I could go on. There was a different and important alchemy to the French-language debate, which was the opportunity for Quebecers to comparison-shop an angry and baffled Gilles Duceppe and a friendly, positive Jack Layton.

But let's get to the bottom line. Look at any summary of public domain polls. They all tell the same story. The New Democrats vaulted over the Liberals in the seven days after the debates, for the first time ever in the middle period of a federal election. The Liberal Party's tactical voting argument disintegrated in the face of those polls. And voters looking for the alternative to Harper then reconsolidated around the New Democrats... almost.

On May 7, 2011, a large crowd, including all of the major figures of the Blakeney and Romanow NDP governments, gathered in Regina for a memorial to former Saskatchewan premier Allan Blakeney, who passed away this year after a cruel illness.

Saskatchewan premier Brad Wall, Opposition Leader Dwain Lingenfelter, former Ontario Premier Bill Davis, former

Alberta premier Peter Lougheed and former premier Romanow were among the speakers who provided an unforgettable tribute to Blakeney. None was more moving than his son Hugh's, who concluded his own remarks by singing a cheerful and loving song that his father was prone to breaking out into when at home.

Jack Layton and former federal NDP leader Ed Broadbent sat together in the front row to join in this celebration of Blakeney's life and career.

The common theme of all of those tributes was to celebrate the idealism and determined progressive reforms Allan Blakeney pursued as premier — twinned to meticulous good government; prudence and pragmatism in implementation; and unblinking prairie fiscal responsibility, including 12 straight balanced budgets.

That is the New Democratic Party's governing tradition.

That is what it has to offer Canadian public affairs when it is doing its best work.

Alas, that is not what Ontario's Blue Grits had on their minds in the last three days of the 2011 campaign.

What they were thinking of — with the help of a tidal wave of last-minute Conservative robo-calls — was a single term of office by an NDP government in Ontario, in the 1990s. And so, in the end, something like 300,000 Liberal voters in Ontario switched to the Conservatives —

giving them a parliamentary majority.

Sometimes, we learn again, it can take quite awhile to get rid of your millstones.

Which is essentially what the people of Canada have now given the NDP an opportunity to do. The New Democrats made remarkable progress in this election, but didn't win it. Instead, they were given a chance to prove they are fit for office — and will now need to make that case directly to perhaps a million additional voters who mostly voted Conservative in this election.

This will sound odd to an eastern Canadian reader, but the NDP is used to persuading Conservative voters to switch to the NDP — that's how it wins office in western Canada, federally and provincially (and helped it win in Nova Scotia).

With the Bloc Québécois reduced to a rump and the federal Liberals in the repair shop (possibly for some time to come, although the Liberals are never to be underestimated), that is the key remaining task facing Canada's New Democrats.

The 103-member federal NDP Official Opposition — the largest and most united Official Opposition in Parliament in three decades — now needs to weave its own best governing traditions deeply into its DNA. And it needs to communicate both its continuing idealism and its tradition of prudence and responsibility to the mainstream of English Canada, while holding its gains in Quebec.

A tall order, no doubt about that.

But look how far they've come already.

Brian Topp is executive director of ACTRA Toronto. He served as deputy chief of staff to Saskatchewan premier Roy Romanow. He coordinated the NDP war room during the 1997 and 2004 federal campaigns; was national campaign director for that party in 2006 and 2008; and served as the NDP's platform co-chair and debate coordinator in 2011.