



Consolidating the Orange Crush

Brad Lavigne

Tom Mulcair at the NDP convention in Ottawa in March. His first job was to unite the party behind his leadership, and by all accounts he has succeeded. NDP photo.

After winning the NDP leadership, Tom Mulcair faced two immediate challenges – to unite the party, and to present it as more than the Official Opposition, but also as a government-in-waiting. More than holding the present government to account, this requires discipline and competence. In his first nine months as Opposition Leader, Mulcair has enjoyed a surprising degree of success. We asked Contributing Writer and NDP insider Brad Lavigne to tell the story so far.

Sitôt élu à la tête du NPD, Thomas Mulcair s'est retrouvé face au double défi d'unifier le parti et de le présenter non seulement comme l'Opposition officielle mais

comme le futur gouvernement. Ce qui nécessitait de réclamer des comptes au gouvernement en exercice mais surtout de faire preuve de compétence et de rigueur. Depuis neuf mois qu'il

est chef de l'opposition, Thomas Mulcair a favorablement étonné. Nous avons demandé à notre collaborateur Brad Lavigne, qui fut longtemps stratège du NPD, de dresser le bilan de son action.

In Canadian federal politics, there are very few under-statements. But to suggest that the New Democratic Party of Canada went through a challenging transition in the last 18 months would be an example of one.

Under the leadership of Jack Layton, the NDP won a historical breakthrough in the May 2011 election that saw it surge from perennial fourth place to Official Opposition, winning 4.6 million votes and 80 percent of the seats in Quebec. The sudden and tragic death of Layton 88 days later forced an unexpected leadership race that neither the party nor any of the contestants wanted or were prepared for.

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The party could have self-imploded. It could have dove head-first into an undisciplined messy leadership race that erased all of the gains of the Layton era. But as keen observers of the mistakes made by leadership transitions of other parties, New Democrats didn't let that happen. Interim leader Nicole Turmel did what her friend Jack Layton asked of her and kept the grieving family together until a permanent leader was selected.

In many respects, the leadership race and the work in the House throughout the six month period was a working through of the grief that the caucus and the membership were feeling. Getting right back to work was exactly what Jack would have expected us to do. The way both the membership and the leadership conducted themselves in the last year and a half revealed true character and maturity.

Unlike almost every modern leadership contest, the NDP wasn't choosing a new leader from the ashes of electoral defeat or after an outgoing leader had overstayed their welcome. The contest wasn't about which direction to turn after failure, rather it was about who could be entrusted to keep the momentum going and who could finish the job Jack started. Both front runners, Brian Topp and Tom Mulcair, embraced the Layton legacy and championed its continuation to completion. The recognition of how far the party had come, and the desire to cross the finish line to form government, trumped all other considerations.

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The leadership race showed that the culture of winning is now completely entrenched in the party, from the caucus right down through to the rank and file. There isn't the sense of entitlement that inflicts the Liberal Party of Canada or Bloc Québécois. Rather, there is a focus of purpose that comes from scratching and clawing your way together, from the back of the pack to the Official Opposition. The party had come too far to let a leadership race come between it and victory.

The tidy and disciplined leadership contest, while labelled as dull and boring by some pundits, paved the way for a smooth transition. The leadership contest was the party's first post-Layton test and it passed with flying colours, despite rumblings from the punditry about how Layton's death meant the demise of the Orange Crush. This flawed analysis failed to recognize both the culture change within the party and the transformation of federal politics in the last decade.

Without question, there is a lot of work to do to complete "the project" of electing the first ever New Democrat prime minister and the first few months of a leadership are vital in setting the fundamentals in place to get the NDP there. So, after his first nine months as leader, how is Mulcair doing?

Let's explore three key areas that have defined his leadership so far: uniting the party, taking on Stephen Harper, and entrenching the 2011 Layton voter coalition.

The first job of a leader after a leadership contest is to unite the party. Tom's first test on this front was in crafting his Shadow Cabinet. Stick-handling the critic assignments after a leadership contest is tricky business. Smart leaders make room for those who ran against them while signalling to their own key supporters that not everyone on the winning team gets a desired assignment. And that's exactly what Mulcair did.

Nathan Cullen, Peggy Nash, Paul Dewar, Nikki Ashton, Robert Chisholm, and Romeo Saganash all ran against Tom and they were all appointed to either their previous critic portfolios or to equally important ones. Meanwhile, Topp's supporters, notably Libby Davies, Françoise Boivin, Jinny Sims, Yvon Godin, Jean Crowder, and Alexandre Boulerice all re-



After uniting the NDP, Brad Lavigne writes that Mulcair's job as opposition leader was "taking on Stephen Harper and entrenching the 2011 Layton voter coalition." Throughout the fall session, the NDP has shown remarkable discipline and cohesion in the House. NDP photo.

ceived key positions on Mulcair's front bench. This strategy was precisely what Layton did by appointing Bill Blaikie as Parliamentary Leader in 2003, and it went equal distance in uniting the caucus and the party.

Nobody in caucus was punished for backing a losing horse, and today there is no annexed group sitting in the corner stewing about how they've been shunted. There is no internal opposition within caucus. This has signalled to the media and public that New Democrats can have a vigorous contest, but once it's over, there is one team united behind the leader. This also allowed the caucus to get back to the immediate task of holding the Harper government to account as the Official Opposition.

Under his watch, Mulcair is defining the NDP as a disciplined, professional, competent group that is ready for government. He has allowed his front bench to take up the spotlight on key files, signalling that he has a cabinet-in-waiting within his caucus.

Meanwhile, the discipline showed during both the Quebec student protests and the provincial election shows the rookie MPs have their eye on the ball and refused to be distracted from the job they were elected to do in Ottawa.

In the House, the NDP has been careful not to assume knee-jerk reactions to ministers' missteps. Taking a medium-term approach to building up the narrative that the rot is setting in on a tiring government is a sharp departure from what the previous Official Opposition did. Here, Mulcair is drawing on his years of experience in the opposition benches in

the National Assembly, where the Quebec Liberals successfully chipped away at the Parti Québécois government's core competencies day in and day out.

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Since the global financial crisis in 2008, the New Democrats have embraced the issue of the economy rather than hide from it. But rather than debate the Conservatives on the macro, the NDP has focused on microeconomic considerations, how the inaction of the government has affected families.

Conservatives want to be known as competent managers of the economy, but the middle class continues to struggle with

record household debt and increasing retirement insecurity. These two issues matter to a voter segment both Mulcair and Harper need to win the next election – suburban households feeling the squeeze. Taking it down to the level of the voter is how the NDP can expose Conservative vulnerabilities on the economy.

One-off ethical lapses have proven to have little negative effect on the Conservative brand. But the NDP is banking – rightly – that the cumulative effect will have greater resonance over time. With the list of breaches by the government growing each month, Mulcair and the caucus are keeping the issue of ethics on the front burner to accelerate the fatigue factor in time for 2015. They are reminding voters that this government is unable to provide the scandal free administration they were first elected to usher in.

Sustainable development is a brand strength for both Mulcair and the party, and offers a significant policy differentiation with the Conservatives. The Conservatives' bizarre and misleading attacks on the NDP that seek to confuse people about the NDP's support for a cap and trade system (the same system outlined in the Tory campaign platform of 2008) just won't cut it. Highlighting sustainable development and Harper's abandonment of his once much touted cap and trade commitment sets up a choice for swing voters between action and inaction.

But careful consideration should be given to the rhetoric that Mulcair and the NDP embrace as they pursue their sensible approach to energy policy and sustainable development. There is a growing audience for an alternative to Harper's lack of action on greenhouse gas emissions and misleading attacks about carbon pricing. Here, Mulcair is seeking to cement the Layton voter coalition from 2011 and expand it.

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The trend lines in the public domain polls show that the NDP under Mulcair is equally or more popular than under Layton. Young people, Quebec francophones, and women continue to fuel the NDP's popularity. While it is early into the four year mandate, keeping those who voted for Layton's NDP in 2011 a full year after his death, suggests that those voters are more than satisfied with the direction in which Mulcair is headed. To build on that, Mulcair must close the gender gap and appeal to men, grow in popularity in subur-

ban Canada, and fight for an even greater share of support in ethnic communities.

Shortly after the May 2011 election, many of the new NDP caucus members from Quebec were surprised to learn how little work the defeated Bloc MPs did in their riding. They got lazy and entitled. With 65 newly elected Members of Parliament in the caucus, Mulcair has placed a significant emphasis on each new MP to entrench themselves in their ridings as strong constituency representatives. Every MP has a directive to organize, ensure a high profile, and fundraise at the local level.

That work is starting to pay off, as witnessed at the party's Quebec section convention in Montreal in November, where over 600 delegates attended. This was the largest meeting of the Quebec membership in the party's 50 year history and a testament to the behind the scenes work done in the last year and a half. The assembled group was a mix of old warhorses who had drifted away during the frustrating era of the 1990s and the recent wave of Layton era activists, all of whom want to finish the job in electing Mulcair prime minister.

But to get there, a lot of work still needs to be done. Mulcair needs to continue to put his own mark on the party and further define himself. He needs to avoid the trappings of being opposed to everything and do it without making himself a target, particularly when it comes to two files that will dominate in the coming years: energy policy and trade.

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On foreign takeovers by state owned enterprises, Mulcair has been careful not to play the anti-China card and focus on process rather than the substance of the CNOOC takeover bid of Nexen. The NDP is not opposed to investment from or trade with China, but Mulcair must eventually signal what he would do differently from Harper on such difficult files. Investors need certainty and Harper is failing to provide it. This is an opportunity for Mulcair to continue the rebranding of the NDP as not only a party with principles but also one that understands the challenging issues that confront not just an Opposition, but a government as well. 

Brad Lavigne is a vice president with Hill+Knowlton Strategies, former Principal Secretary to the Hon. Jack Layton, and campaign director of the 2011 NDP national campaign.