

# Maher: Harper could be facing an ideologically divided NDP in 2012

BY STEPHEN MAHER, POSTMEDIA NEWS JANUARY 2, 2012



Brian Topp, NDP president in his Toronto, ACTRA office on September 7, 2011.

**Photograph by:** JENNIFER ROBERTS, Postmedia News

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On May 2, 2011, voters gave Stephen Harper a "strong, stable, Conservative majority government" and made Jack Layton the leader of the Opposition.

The two events are two faces of a single coin. After the coalition crisis of 2008, Harper managed to frame the choice facing Canadian voters in stark terms — Tory majority or economic ruin — and succeeded in wrenching our politics away from the centre.

His government is the most conservative in recent history, facing the most left-wing opposition ever.

Our House of Commons has this shape today because about 2.5 million people gave up on the Liberals and Bloc Quebecois, and voted Tory or NDP in May.

One of the big questions of 2012 is how successful the Tories and NDP are in holding the allegiance of those new supporters.

Will the prime minister proceed incrementally, as he did during the minority era, or will he respond to the global economic crisis by, for example, reducing equalization and Employment Insurance?

In 1997, Harper decried Canada as "a Northern European welfare state in the worst sense of the term." He is now running that welfare state, more or less unchanged, but he doesn't have a mandate to dismantle it, and he has promised that there will be no surprises. Slash too deep and he risks alienating the 623,332 first-time Tory voters who gave him his majority.

He may have a plan, Mike Harris-style, to make radical changes early and then find ways to get back in the good books of moderate voters.

On the other side of the House, the New Democrats must be thinking about the 1,993,186 voters who cast their ballots for the NDP for the first time in 2011.

Harper and Layton both made their gains after years of careful work: building their teams, cultivating constituencies, delivering increasingly effective messages, while the Liberals, in crisis, repeatedly shook up their teams, changed leaders and messages.

Layton died a few months after his moment of triumph; since then his party has been struggling and the Liberals have been mounting a comeback under Bob Rae.

But in March, NDP supporters will elect a new leader, which will give the party focus.

In September, when Brian Topp launched his candidacy with Ed Broadbent by his side, I wrote that the leadership race "looked like it was all but over."

That's not how it looks now. Insiders think Topp is in fourth place, behind Thomas Mulcair, Peggy Nash and Paul Dewar.

A few days ago, Topp dropped his gloves and went after Mulcair, warning that the former Quebec Liberal "wants to move our party to the centre," contrasting that with his own "clear and principled social-democratic" positions.

So far, the NDP race has been long on bromides and short on meaningful contrast. That won't last forever, because trailing candidates, like Topp, will need to attack their rivals.

The divide that he outlined — between traditional social democrats and more centrist candidates — should become clearer, with Nash the furthest left, followed by Topp, with Dewar in the middle and Mulcair on the right.

In Topp's book about the backroom manoeuvres that led to the stillborn 2008 coalition, he says NDP activists sent their nickels to the party over the decades "so that MPs representing them could kick the wealthy and privileged out of office, take over the state, and put it to work for ordinary working people," which is not necessarily an appealing agenda for 2011's first-time NDP voters, not to mention the people who didn't vote NDP in the last election.

After the election, pollster Greg Lyle, of Innovative Research, asked voters the following question: Is the main role of government 1) to create opportunity so that everyone can compete on their own to be the best they can be or 2) to redistribute wealth so that the poor and the disadvantaged have

more than they would if left on their own?

Fifty-five per cent of traditional NDP supporters want redistribution, while 58 per cent of new NDPers want equal opportunity, as do 70 per cent of other voters. This is a key difference in values, the fault line at the heart of both the NDP leadership race and the struggle between Liberals and New Democrats.

Elsewhere in his book, Topp reports that Layton saw the Liberals as the "family compact" party of the Rosedale set, with an interest not in equality, but in "equality of opportunity," which sounds like the values of the new NDP voters.

Layton had a masterly ability to blur that kind of difficult division, and he benefited from a lack of scrutiny because of the NDP's third-party status. His successor will face a tougher environment — Tory attack ads — and will not have Layton's skills.

And the new leader will face a prime minister in his prime: a cunning strategist hardened by years of struggle, a master at manipulating the levers of power.

The smart money is on continued Conservative dominance through the next election, but 2011 provided plentiful lessons in the limits of prognostication.

Nobody saw the orange wave coming, and I thought Topp was going to take the NDP leadership in a walk.

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