AN INTERVIEW WITH JACK LAYTON

Leader of the New Democratic Party of Canada



1) As you know, the Canadian population is increasingly diverse. Many wonder if that diversity is being reflected in our elected institutions. Can you please give us some idea of the diversity of your caucus? For example, how many women, immigrants, visible minorities, and Aboriginal peoples were elected in your party in the last federal election?

Canada's diversity is a source of resilience, pride and great strength – culturally, economically, and beyond. But that rich diversity is shamefully under-represented in our elected institutions, especially at the federal level.

Women's progress has been slow: One in five MPs in this Parliament is female. Meanwhile, perhaps 5% of my colleagues in the House are visible minorities – compared with some 13% in the general population.

In the 2004 federal election, Canadians elected 19 New Democrats, including five women and two gay/lesbian candidates. One third of our caucus comes from groups identified as under-represented. The NDP also has the highest proportion of women MPs on the Hill (26%), as we have through four successive Parliaments.

We are making progress, but all parties still have a great deal of work to do.

The NDP made a quantum leap this past election, nearly doubling its share of the popular vote. (With proportional representation, we would hold 49 seats, not 19.) But after fielding 27 visible minority candidates, we were unable to welcome even one to our caucus on June 28. That was a grave disappointment, and it cut close to home.

My wife, Toronto City Councillor Olivia Chow, ran a strong campaign in Trinity-Spadina. Olivia and 11 other NDP candidates fell short by fewer than 1000 votes. Five of those candidates were women. Four of them lost to men.

Too many terrific NDP candidates were felled by the Liberals' eleventh-hour "strategic voting" ruse. Stephen Harper seemed to be pressing at the gate. So Paul Martin criss-crossed the country telling NDPers to vote Liberal to guarantee a progressive agenda in Ottawa. In some ridings, that strategy pushed Conservatives over the top to victory – the same Tories that propped up Martin's right-wing budget this February.

2) What measures has your party taken to involve immigrants and minorities as party members, electoral candidates, and MPs? Are these measures working? Does more need to be done?

Before the 1993 election, our party adopted a nominations and affirmative action (AA) policy. Its goal is nothing less than to present voters with a candidate team that fully reflects Canada's diversity. Ultimately, we extend that same ideal to the composition of Parliament itself.

I hear myself talking about "ideals." I look forward, impatiently, to the day when a fully representative House of Commons is an expectation – a given.

At the riding level, NDP candidate nominations are democratic processes. But long before ballots are cast, we can act to make effective nomination campaigns a real possibility for people from under-represented groups. That's where the AA policy does its work.

Much responsibility has rested at the local level. A riding must satisfy two conditions before the national party will accept its nominations. First, the local candidate search committee must itself reflect the riding's special diversity. Second, there must be a candidate for nomination from at least one designated group.

Our policy designates the following groups as under-represented: women, people of colour, Aboriginal people, people living with disabilities, gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered people and youth.

Results on the ground have been promising but uneven. That's not surprising: we're aiming for a cultural revolution of sorts at the local level. Recognizing the need to do more, NDP federal council passed a full AA implementation strategy this January – encompassing concrete guidelines, methods and resources to achieve concrete results.

3) Research suggests that in order to secure a party's nomination, immigrants and minorities need to have more education, more experience and deeper roots in their communities. Given that in order to run, a candidate must first be nominated, how do you ensure that immigrants and minorities are able to participate equitably in nomination contests?

More people from under-represented groups are stepping forward for nomination. We will have taken the next step – a bigger step – when more candidates are coming forward with the resources and strength to win. That's the challenge taken up by our new affirmative action implementation strategy.

This is still about doing more to find strong minority candidates – local advocates and community leaders who may not yet envision a place for themselves in federal politics. But it's also about raising the capacity of declared candidates to mount successful campaigns in contested nomination races.

The new strategy is an integrated one compelling involvement at all levels of the party. Here are some of the initiatives that you'll see before the next election…

Finding nomination candidates: National staff will support local candidate selection committees to reach AA goals. Between elections, staff will help riding executives boost the diversity of their own ranks – a real key to shifting the culture. The national candidate search coordinator will stage brainstorming sessions with community leaders to identify strong prospects. Local riding associations will conduct similar sessions with national support. And as leader, I will personally approach promising prospects to discuss their needs and their fit with the party.

Supporting nomination candidates: National staff will organize candidate schools for minority prospects – raising capacity and confidence. We will hire special AA officers to directly support candidates from designated groups. (As dedicated staff, they will work openly, with no implication of quiet bias.) We will also tackle the financial barriers faced by many prospects, who often must take unpaid leave in order to run. Measures will include bursaries, up to the equivalent of salary replacement. Those will supplement grants already available through the donation-supported Agnes Macphail Fund and Affirmative Action Fund (covering childcare, household help, and some campaign expenses).

The strategy includes a special monitoring and input role for the party's equity-seeking committees (representing women, youth, visible minorities, people living with visibilities, Aboriginal people, and GLBT people).

Finally, there are built-in feedback loops to continuously improve the strategy based on results achieved on the ground. The bottom line: Targets are not enough. The entire organization must now take responsibility for delivering results.

I often reflect on the example set by Monia Mazigh, who ran for us in Ottawa South in 2004. Monia's struggle to free Maher Arar, her husband, had thrust her onto the Canadian stage as a human rights defender. Her resilience and integrity certainly captured my attention. Monia will tell you now that she'd never imagined a place for herself in federal politics. But through many conversations – with myself, with Alexa McDonough – that idea became real and realistic for her. It was a process of mutual learning, and the investment was very worthwhile.

We know there are more Monia Mazighs labouring today in the trenches, feeling disjointed from federal politics. Our challenge is to reach out to them far more systematically than we have.

4) Outside of the electoral arena, how does your party involve a diverse range of Canadians in, for example, consultation activities or the setting of party policy? What challenges do you face in trying to reflect the interests of so many individuals?

The NDP is a *policy*-driven party, as opposed to a politics-driven party. Our policy is grounded in principles of social justice and human rights. Policy is set democratically at federal convention – the party's highest governing body. For our MPs, upholding policy is a sober responsibility.

Convention delegates represent both riding associations and affiliated unions. The affiliate structure reflects the NDP's roots as an advocate for working families. Our Associate President responsible for affiliated unions, Hassan Yussuf, is well known for his articulate advocacy for expanding political participation.

The NDP's elected equity-seeking committees are one focus for advocacy on behalf of under-represented groups. These include:

- Participation of Women (POW) Committee;
- Participation of Visible Minorities (POVM) Committee;
- Persons Living with Disabilities Committee;
- Aboriginal Committee; and
- Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgendered (LGBT) Committee.

Similarly, the New Democratic Youth of Canada (NDYC) advocates for a group of Canadians under-represented both in the halls of power and at the polling booth.

Each equity-seeking body may submit resolutions directly to convention. Their chairpersons also sit *ex officio* on both the federal executive and federal council – our governing body between conventions. In these capacities, they are empowered and expected to assert priorities of inclusion at all levels of policy- and goal-setting.

Consultation is in this party's blood. The NDP is the political face of a broader movement fighting for social, environmental, political and economic justice. To consult with citizens and their movements – and to act with them – is more than natural. It is the core of our mission and identity.

Many NDPers – MPs, officers, members and staff – come to us from community-based groups. They infuse the party with more than the wisdom and experience of those roots. They also carry on continuing relationships with social movements. Those *relationships* are a platform for consultation, for finding and testing good ideas at the local level. You see consultation unfold at many levels outside convention, outside the strictly formal. It may sometimes look like William James' "blooming, buzzing confusion" … but we call it informal democracy at work.

As leader, I have worked toward systematizing some of these community linkages. We created several advocacy teams within caucus, each focussed on a key priority –

from health to democracy to the environment. Each team of MPs is responsible for proposing solutions and connecting Caucus with academics, community groups and citizens. The Diversity Advocacy Team has been reaching out to under-represented groups, working on a whole spectrum of anti-racism, justice and diversity issues. Those have included racial profiling, security certificates and Canada's draconian security laws that – unlike Mr. Harper and Mr. Martin – the NDP strongly opposed.

In recent years, there have been drives within the NDP to formalize our linkages to wider social movements. Debates have been vigorous, and those discussions continue.

5) Your party fielded fewer visible minority candidates than the Conservative Party in the last federal election which, as you know, does not have an affirmative action policy. Why do you think that is? What are some of the challenges you face in trying to nominate a diverse slate of candidates? Is an affirmative action policy the only solution, or are other measures needed?

When Conservatives are fielding more visible minority candidates, that's a good sign. These candidates bring new perspectives to the table, and they have a positive role-modelling effect. Building an inclusive Parliament is a mission for all parties.

But the Conservatives are no model for the NDP! The Conservative Party has regressive immigration policies and bristles at official multiculturalism. Today, Conservatives are pitting minority groups against one another in the equal marriage debate – without telling them that many of their allies against equal marriage are also out there fighting turbans in the RCMP.

Meanwhile, the NDP is dedicated to human rights, diversity and a just society for working families. We know who wins on policy.

We really have to examine the pathways that carry people to candidacy. They are many and varied, and they are different from pathways to the polling booth.

I have discussed this phenomenon with Myer Siemiatycki, a professor at Ryerson University. Myer has spent years examining the dynamics of political participation among Canadian newcomers and minorities. He is also a great friend, and I owe much insight to our conversations.

Myer points to a trend among newcomers to lean toward larger parties that are likely to win. Research suggests newcomers may support governing parties in gratitude for being welcomed here. That impulse may even stronger for newcomers leaving conflict zones or fleeing human rights abuses. There can be a pressure to fit in quickly – to avoid "rocking the boat" by joining a party that's clamouring for change.

I don't dwell on this. The NDP is building support in newcomer communities. And we know we can also develop more candidates from their ranks. These prospective candidates are out there now, and we are committed to doing more to connect with them.

Let's be frank: it takes a special character to run for the NDP. This is a party of leaders and fighters. NDPers have cut their teeth on community frontlines, throwing their lives into struggles. Those backgrounds produce great MPs – but may also make them harder to recruit initially. When people are making a difference on the ground, federal politics can seem remote. Decades of visionless majority rule devastated many Canadians' sense of what's possible in government. NDP MPs worked valiantly to engage ordinary Canadians, but they were vastly outnumbered for the better part of a generation.

What I'm identifying here is a general recruitment challenge for the NDP. Layered on top of that are the special barriers that newcomers and minorities face. And there's another layer still. For many newcomers, getting involved in the community can be a precious first point of identification in a new home. Those powerful bonds are hard to compete with.

Is affirmative action a complete solution? No. It is a step in a process of enduring change. Affirmative action functions for us on at least three interacting levels:

First, barriers to political participation are real. Affirmative action is about naming that as a problem, and accepting our responsibility to act on it now. Canadians expect nothing less from the NDP.

Second, when minority candidates do step forward, they become positive role models within their communities. Their commitment to the process can change people's conception of the possible – of what an MP can look and sound like.

Third, affirmative action is a catalyst for change within the party itself. This shared challenge compels all of us to better understand the dynamics of political participation. That understanding can become a platform for new approaches to diversifying our ranks.

Finally, let's not ignore the elephant in this room. There is a deepening *general* crisis in our democracy. Voter turnout in federal elections has been plummeting for years. Last year's 60.5% turnout was an all-time low. Decades of grim, managerial rule have numbed the popular imagination. Canadians are turning away from government that reeks of scandal and irrelevance. Trying to diversify political participation without also tackling this general crisis would be like mopping the deck of a sinking ship.

This minority Parliament is a precious opportunity. New Democrats are finally back in a position to reignite our great national conversations – conversations that connect with Canadians' lived experience. These are conversations about raising a family in a changing world, about keeping ourselves healthy, about getting an affordable education, about building stronger communities, about cleaning the air we breathe. These are the conversations that can get people excited about politics again.

To fully re-engage Canadians, we must also reform our antiquated electoral system. Dominant parties are sailing to seat counts that far exceed their share of the popular vote. Adopting some form of proportional representation (PR) would assure Canadians that their votes do count. Adopting PR would open a space for other parties and other voices. (Under pure PR, the NDP would hold 49 seats, not 19!) Canadians would almost certainly also elect more women and more visible minorities under PR.

Canada is trailing the world on this one. All but two members of the OECD have already adopted some form of PR. What are we waiting for?