

November 27, 01

Hard Right for the NDP

This weekend NDP delegates gathered in Winnipeg to “re-design” their party. They were divided. Some delegates, like Sven Robinson, wanted to redesign it so much that it became a different party. Leader Alex McDonough wanted to redesign it, but not so much that she lost her leadership. However, what all delegates wanted, presumably, was to ensure that the redesigned NDP would sweep to power or at least regain some national prominence.

They failed.

They failed because not a single senior member of the party was willing to raise the central – ironic - issue of the decline of the NDP: they are losing votes to the political right.

Poll after poll has shown that the natural working class NDP voter has defected from the party and gone not to the Liberal Party but to the Canadian Alliance. Why? Because the Canadian Alliance Party has become the natural political expression of the working class in Canada, and the NDP refuses to talk about this issue.

The people who run the NDP are for the most part nice, decent, middle class Maude Barlows. Their icons are decaf Latte intellectuals like Naomi Klein. They are smart and humane: but most have never punched a time clock in their life. They tend to talk down to working class people – regarding them as a bunch of monster truck rallying, baseball cap wearing thickies who if they were smart or enlightened enough would understand why the NDP social policies are good for them.

But that is not the case. There is a natural gap between the middle class policies as advocated by the current NDP and the working class. The Canadian Alliance Party knows this and has stolen voters from the NDP across the country. Take immigration: the NDP advocates a policy of increasing immigration. But if you’re working at the meat plant and you raise too many complaints: what does the boss tell you? “Shut up or I’ll get a bunch of immigrants in here for five bucks an hour!” The Barlows and Kleins have never heard this type of language. They want Canadian society to embrace multiculturalism and learn to like foreigners. A good, noble idea. However, it is not really an issue for middle class people. They have learned to protect their jobs. Engineer from Poland? Doctor from Italy? Journalist from Bangladesh? “Back of the line buddy! Go back to school for five years and get recertified.” To the middle class immigration means cheaper Filipina nannies and pliant, but confused, cabbies. To the working class immigration is a natural enemy. In examining early CCF and NDP manifestos it is clear that the party used to know that lesson very well. There were lots of calls for “international brotherhood” but not many invitations for foreign brothers to move to Canada.

It is the same with crime issues. The political spectrum in dealing with criminals, as seen by working class people, is: Canadian Alliance – lock em up, throw away the key: NDP - group hug therapy for bikers. Again the NDP attitude makes perfect sense if you’re drinking mineral water in a suburb. Try, however, living in some working class areas where drugs are sold openly and the police are too frightened to walk down the street. It didn’t used to be that way. Back at the NDP’s heyday – when the Cotronis and other US Mafia henchmen were running Montreal. The NDP was the only political party to declare that a Mafia existed in Canada and must be fought. The Liberal and Conservative Parties which at that time could have been Olympic contenders in a political corruption competition, staunchly maintained that Canada was free from organised crime. Canadian voters recognised honesty in the NDP and awarded them for it.

It is the same along the social policy line. Gay rights and foreign aid? NDP advisors want more: Canadian working people, generally, want less. Death penalty and direct democracy initiatives? The NDP wants none: their erstwhile supporters want to see more votes and Paul Bernardo fried.

There is an important difference, however, between economic and social issues. And this idea does not mean that the NDP should throw away their economic ideals. If they want to regain their importance to working people in Canada they should push harder for more left wing economic ideas (defence against “Free trade” and four weeks of holidays for every Canadian worker), but be much more conservative socially. Remember their peak of popularity was when they were run by a group of politically interested, but born again Christian ministers like Tommy Douglas and J.S. Woodsworth.

Don't believe this? Try this on for a size. Who do you think would get more working people out to hear their ideas on a Saturday night in Barrie, Ontario: Sven Robinson or Stockwell Day? The people who think it would be Sven – haven't been to a monster truck rally recently and are probably advising the NDP.

Declan Hill is a freelance journalist who has punched a time clock, but likes decaf lattes.