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NDP dilemma

Are the NDP's vital life signs failing? Interviewed last week on TV Ontario's *Realities*, the party's federal secretary, Gerald Caplan, insisted that there was still life in our old socialist party.

Party stalwarts may still get that urge to storm the barricades of capitalism, but Canadian voters obviously do not share this dated passion. Recent polls show the federal NDP supported by only 14% of voters. A new election threatens to reduce the NDP to only a few seats in Parliament.

Caplan complained, "Nobody listens to us." Two of his remarks were a very good reason why. Describing the state of modern socialism, Caplan made the interesting slip of referring to Canada as a rich, north European country.

Now we all know that both the NDP and the Liberals really want Canada to be another Sweden or Denmark, complete with wumb-to-lumb welfare and unions dominating industry. But most Canadians clearly do not want to model themselves on the over-taxed, bureaucratic and dreadfully dull Scandinavian socialist states that are now in long-term economic decline.

Then the interviewer, Richard Gwyn, raised the interesting point that most Canadians viewed increasing state intervention — the basic tenet of NDP policy — as "oppressive." Again, Caplan's reply was illuminating.

Ottawa was not "oppressive" he insisted. Casting about for an example of a truly oppressive regime, Caplan came up with Chile. This tells us a lot about the NDP's mindset. In a world filled with truly tyrannical regimes where people cannot even speak to their own children for fear of being denounced, Caplan held up Chile as the worst.

Blind to reality

Can we really put much faith in people who are so evidently blind to reality? What about Russia, with 250,000 KGB agents; China, where there is a party spy in each apartment building; or that happy worker's paradise, East Germany? When did the NDP last see workers protesting in Moscow or Leipzig? If the NDP truly believes Chile the outstanding "oppressive" regime, they must also believe that cows jump over a pink moon.

The hard reality is that most Canadian voters just don't believe any more in the discredited nostrums of socialism. We have seen socialism in our time, and it does not work. Those Canadians who still do believe in stale leftist platitudes have switched to the letter-than-thou Liberals.

Which leaves the NDP with its traditional core of support, the fat-cat unions. Caplan was obviously uncomfortable addressing this question, particularly in light of the recent Laxer Report that challenged the NDP's sweetheart relations with union interests.

The NDP is caught in the same dilemma that faces the British Labor party. Almost everyone now realizes that the inflated wages, featherbedding, trade protectionism and indexed salaries advocated by unions are damaging the economy. And, as in England, our socialist party is seen as little more than the political extension of the powerful labor bosses.

Few people any more believe that an NDP government would be able to place the broad national interest before its political dues to the unions. Caplan edged around this issue by stating that "even the NDP" would have to provide incentives to private industry.

Revealingly, he added that NDP assistance would be contingent upon closed union shops, extensive layoff provisions and tight union control. What healthy company in its right mind would accept such a deal?

Similar programs have been tried in Europe and the results were disastrous. Belgium, Holland, Sweden and Denmark have all imposed such practices on their industries. Today, these nations are in deep recession with an average of 12% unemployed. Their manufacturing industries — inefficient and saddled with overpriced labor — are dying.

Holland's bad situation

The situation has gotten so bad in Holland, another socialist bastion with 15.5% unemployment, that workers can only be fired for using profane language. Workers can call in sick for six months and still keep their jobs. When you cannot fire people the natural tendency is not to hire.

Most Canadians look to the U.S. as the proper example of economic policy. Union power has been curtailed, employment is rising and inflation is down to 4%. America is booming again, while Canada, still deep in the embrace of state socialism, remains mired in recession and unemployment.

Undaunted by this striking difference, the NDP takes refuge in its self-appointed role, described by Caplan, as defender of the "unemployed, those on welfare, Indians, and women." Richard Gwyn neatly punctured this argument by his observation that the NDP needed these "oppressed" more than they needed the NDP.

It's the old sales technique. If you can't find customers, create them. Lively minds in the NDP will surely come up with new categories of the downtrodden: Children, unattractive women, okra pickers or people with warts. Organize and fund them, raise their consciousness and, voila!, new voters.

Unfortunately for the NDP, the pros in the Liberal party are far better at this game. The NDP simply needs some new ideas; it is suffering from tired blood. Perhaps just the thing would be a party congress in some fraternal socialist state like Tanzania. Visitors there are advised, however, to bring their own food, toothpaste and toilet-paper — Tanzania has run out.

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