

THE PROVINCE

Old-time crusaders agog at Rae's NDP

IN OTTAWA, New Democrat MPs are busy calculating their pensions. They suspect that thanks to Bob Rae, many won't be around after the next federal election.

In the union movement, an old debate has been revived. The question is not whether labor should criticize Rae — that's now a given. Rather labor is asking whether Rae's government has done so much harm to the NDP that the party is beyond redemption.



Queen's Park

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The Ontario Federation of Labor argues that it can, in the words of Canadian Union of Public Employees head Judy Darcy, "take back" the NDP and return it to its roots.

But Canadian Labor Congress head Bob White has hinted he's interested in refocusing labor away from formal party politics (and the NDP) and towards extra-parliamentary action.

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CP FILE PHOTO

HAPPIER DAYS: Premier Bob Rae could count on the unflagging support last summer of labor leaders Bob White, left, and Frank McAnally, right. This year, the labor movement is accusing him of destroying the NDP's traditional roots.

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At the centre of all of this is Rae. Almost single-handedly, this slight blond bundle of contradictions has caused chaos inside his party.

The Ontario Premier's unrepentant disavowal of traditional New Democrat policies, his enthusiastic embrace of a more conservative agenda, and the eloquent way in which he pursues this agenda have caused consternation inside the NDP from coast to coast.

Nowhere is the consternation more intense than inside the federal party. For the Rae experience has convinced many voters, particularly in Ontario, that the NDP has no clothes, that its policies are bankrupt, its moral crusades ultimately empty.

What other conclusions is one to draw? When asked why the Ontario government has abandoned almost everything it stood for in opposition — public auto insurance, job creation above fiscal restraint, the principle of collective bargaining, pension reform, industrial strategy, a better deal for the poor — high-level New Democrats just shrug. They say their opposition platform was impractical, a way to win votes.

They say they were never serious. Or as Rae has said, "That was then."

For anyone thinking of voting NDP in the upcoming federal election, this is sobering. Audrey McLaughlin's federal New Democrats say they will put the jobless first; but so did Rae. The federal NDP says its plans are serious, tested, and that if it won it could handle governing. So too did Rae.

But in reality, the Ontario New Democrats never expected to win

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power. They were unprepared when they did. At the first sign of trouble, they jettisoned much of their own platform and adopted instead whatever agenda happened to be around — in this case that of a much better-prepared, shrewder and more sophisticated business class.

Many Ontarians who might have voted New Democrat federally this fall will cast their ballots elsewhere — not just because of the usual voter frustration with an incumbent provincial government but because the experience of the last three years has demonstrated that the NDP are not who they say they are.

It is a fundamental issue of credibility.

The NDP nationally could have weathered this if the testing ground hadn't been Ontario — and if the central figure hadn't been Rae.

Saskatchewan has a right-wing NDP government. But Saskatchewan is small; it carries little clout. And Saskatchewan Premier Roy Romanow is cautious. He avoids controversy, doesn't seek out the press.

By contrast, Rae loves the national scene. He likes nothing better than to explain what he is doing to a national audience, preferably in Ottawa or on a nationally televised interview.

At an NDP meeting in Gananoque last month, Rae waxed enthusiastic about his controversial social contract idea, which allows the government to roll back union contracts.

"I happened to believe not that we should be pulling back on the social contract but that we have to extend it, extend the idea behind it . . . extend it

nationally," he said as horrified unionists in his audience shouted, "No, no."

Ontario is too big for Canada to ignore; Rae is too important for his party to ignore (lapsed New Democrat Jim Laxer calls him the most powerful social democrat in Canadian history).

From Winnipeg last week, former New Democrat MP David Orlikow sent a long and impassioned letter to Rae, attacking his entire economic approach.

"When I look at what your government is proposing," the 75-year-old Orlikow wrote, "I say it's wrong, wrong, wrong . . . Our leaders in 1933 (when the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, forerunner of the NDP, was founded) believed that our fundamental objective as a movement was the establishment of a more equitable society. Surely that is still the main objective of the NDP. If it isn't, I've been in the wrong party for a long time."

A key word in that letter is "movement." Many in the NDP think of it as more than a party. They think of it as a crusade.

But as party member Craig Smith told The Star's Kelly Toughill at Gananoque, "The party changed radically the day we were elected. Now we're a political party, not a movement."

This, if the NDP doesn't destroy itself first, may be Rae's greatest — and possibly grimmest — achievement.

In the past, the NDP saw itself as a progressive organization. By that, it meant it was on the cutting edge; its

views might not always be popular, but they were grounded in principle and (here the NDP shared the general conceit of the left) would be proven correct by history.

Sometimes history did pay that compliment. Among politicians, New Democrat MPs were virtually alone in opposing Ottawa's imposition of the War Measures Act in 1970, an act that removed the civil liberties of all Canadians in order to deal with violent Quebec separatists.

At the time, the NDP position was wildly unpopular. Only later, after the passions had worn down, did most Canadian agree with what the New Democrats had done.

But this kind of stand on principle is the hallmark of a movement. Most standard political parties feel they cannot afford abstract principle. They move with the mood. And with two striking exceptions — native rights and the Constitution — this is what Rae has done; he has moved with the mood.

In Ontario, the mood is conservative. Most Ontarians think the government should concentrate on controlling its deficit. So, abandoning its long-held view about how economies work, that's what the Rae government is doing.

Most Ontarians think public servants are coddled and overpaid. The Rae government is opening up union contracts to slash public service wages.

Most Ontarians think welfare recipients are lazy cheats. The NDP used to fight this view. Now Rae emphasizes the responsibility the poor

have to a society that hands out the dole. And his government has just released a proposal to overhaul welfare, a proposal so close to right-wing workfare notions that it has been praised by the federal Tories.

Most Ontarians want to shop on Sunday; Rae instituted Sunday shopping. Most have no qualms about gambling; Rae is building a casino at Windsor.

Many in the NDP are frustrated with the cavalier way in which Rae overrides party policy. He in turn seems genuinely frustrated with his party. In effect, he is saying: Sure we're not following NDP policy, but so what? We're doing what most people seem to want. Isn't that what politics is all about?

It's a fair question, one with which the NDP will have to grapple.

There has long been a split in the NDP between those who believe in ideological purity above all and those who believe that electoral success requires compromise.

But Rae has raised the stakes logarithmically. If the NDP must compromise so much that it wipes out everything that distinguishes it from other parties, then what is the point?

This is the question that labor is raising. Union leaders such as Ontario Federation of Labor head Gord Wilson are saying they want their party back, even if it is a party doomed to perpetual opposition.

Better to have a social democratic party in opposition, they are saying, than another conservative party in power.