

**Structural Changes and Political Challenges:
The New Democratic Party in the 1990s**

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During the 1990s social democracy in English-speaking Canada entered a crisis of such magnitude that the very existence of the federal New Democratic Party (NDP) came into question. From the 1950s to the 1980s, each decade had seen an increase in the average percentage of the vote received by the federal NDP. Across the country, the NDP reached the pinnacle of its electoral strength with the 1988 federal election and the subsequent provincial elections in Ontario (1990), Saskatchewan (1991) and British Columbia (1991). These heady times were short-lived and the onset of social democratic decline was dramatic.

Governing in difficult times, the NDP provincial governments frequently came into political conflict with their own supporters as they struggled to develop a modernized version of social democracy. The conflict and the adverse electoral consequences were most dramatic in Ontario and the ramifications impacted the federal NDP. In the three federal elections from 1993 to 2000, the NDP received an average of less than 9% of the popular vote and even less than that in Ontario, the industrial heartland of the country. From 1962 to 1988, the federal NDP had averaged 17.2% of the total vote and 20% of the Ontario vote in federal elections (Whitehorn, 1992: 263-264). Provincially, the Ontario NDP crashed from 37.6% of the vote in the historic victory of 1990 to 20.6% in 1995 and 12.6% in 1999. In British Columbia, the tumultuous reign of the NDP, which included the resignation of two Premiers, came to a cashing halt in 2001 as the party was reduced to two seats.

The NDP's electoral fortunes did remain more promising on the Prairies. The NDP has continued to govern Saskatchewan since 1991, though it was reduced to minority government status between 1999 and 2003. The NDP returned to office in Manitoba in 1999 for the first time since 1988. The crisis of Canadian social democracy, however, went well beyond the electoral viability of the NDP. While the crisis of Canadian social democracy manifests itself, in part, as an electoral decline, even where it remains electorally viable, the ideological and programmatic content of the contemporary NDP's social democracy is questionable. Whether it remained electorally viable or seemed threatened by electoral oblivion, across Canada the NDP's postwar vision of social democracy had been called into question and has undergone a significant transition.

The contemporary transformation of the NDP's social democracy has not been adequately theorized or addressed. There are two fundamental and closely related challenges in developing a sophisticated assessment of the NDP's trajectory. First, it is necessary to seriously investigate the relationship between structures and agency. We need to explore the changing structural context in which the party acts, but also examine the party's response (or lack of response) to that context. The context itself is not simply a given reality; it is in turn shaped by political actors, including political parties. Second, it is necessary to examine the specific domestic conjuncture of the NDP's crisis and transformation while maintaining an awareness of international transformation of social democratic politics. Often the NDP's plight is analyzed only in domestic terms, as if social democracy internationally has not faced similar challenges. Specific domestic factors obviously do play a fundamental role. Yet, it is impossible to adequately explain the plight of Canadian social democracy without reference to this international and comparative context (see Moschonas, 2002).

Calling for a similar framework to analyze the British Labour Party, Nick Randall has written that "Such a model may not provide especially parsimonious explanations. But it does promise more nuanced accounts of ideological change" (2003: 20). This paper will lay out a preliminary roadmap toward such an understanding of the NDP's crisis and transformation in the 1990s.

Theorizing the Crisis and Transformation of Social Democracy

The contemporary re-thinking of social democracy is not without historical precedent. Social democracy has transformed itself before. Donald Sassoon has described how social democratic revisionism has repeatedly resulted from political setbacks and the perception of new times:

Since [Eduard] Bernstein, socialists have continued periodically to revise their views and positions: usually as a response to changed circumstances, almost always as a result of political defeat. The argument proceeds according to fixed parameters: capitalism is not what it was (or at least what we thought it was); the working class is not what it was (or what we thought it was); if socialists do not change they will disappear (1999: 14).

Fortified by such arguments about the changing nature of capitalism and social relations, the years after the Second World War saw the parliamentary road to socialism transformed into the parliamentary road to “social capitalism” (Sassoon, 1996). The conditions of the post-war boom encouraged social democrats in Canada, as elsewhere, to revise their tactics and goals. As the party’s National Chairman Frank R. Scott told the 1950 Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) national convention, “socialists everywhere are taking stock of their position in the light of post-war experiences” (Scott, 1986: 91). During the so-called post-war ‘Golden Age,’ social democrats sought to build domestic class compromises around Keynesian full employment policies, the mixed economy, the welfare state, workplace stability, and increasing productivity (Scott, 1986: 90-97; Lewis, 1955). In the most advanced social democratic models of northern Europe, corporatist income policies managed non-inflationary wage growth.

This process of post-war social democratic revisionism has been well-documented in the Canadian case of the CCF/NDP (Brodie and Jenson, 1988: 217-261; Cross, 1974; Young, 1969; Zakuta, 1964). While the ideological transformation of the CCF can be traced back to much earlier developments, in 1956 the CCF modernized its statement of principles with its Winnipeg Declaration, replacing the 1933 Regina Manifesto’s rhetorical commitment to a post-capitalist future through widespread nationalization of finance and industry. Solidifying its commitment to Keynesian welfare capitalism, the transformation of the CCF into NDP in 1961 was an attempt to reach out to ‘liberally-minded persons.’

What is perhaps most remarkable about the academic literature on the CCF’s post war transformation is that it is almost exclusively framed in terms of internal party dynamics and the domestic party system while ignoring the broader international context of social democratic transformation despite such hints as the fact that Hugh Gaitskell, the revisionist leader of the British Labour Party, was a guest speaker at the founding convention of the NDP (Young, 1969: 134). Did Labour Party revisionism, typified by the publication of Anthony Crosland’s *The Future of Socialism* in 1956 and the battle over clause four of the Labour Party’s constitution, have no impact on Canadian social democracy? Ironically, Canadian observers of the NDP have made much of Robert Michels’ “iron law of oligarchy” which developed from a close observation of the German Social Democrats (SPD), but have basically ignored the SPD’s revisionist Bad Godesberg program of 1959 (Sassoon, 1996: 241-273).

The latest round of social democratic revisionism is largely in response to the economic transformations which emerged during the 1970s. As the Golden Age began to lose its lustre and significant economic difficulties emerged during the 1970s, social democrats faced newfound challenges. In Canada, as elsewhere, the crisis of the Keynesian welfare state presented a fundamental challenge for social democratic

politics. Social democratic theorists argue that with the crisis of 'old social democracy', a new or modernized social democracy that adapts to the new era is a viable and necessary political project. It has become necessary, in Anthony Giddens words, "to adapt social democracy to a world which has changed fundamentally over the past two or three decades" (1998: 26).

Various explanations have been put forward to account for the crisis and repositioning of social democracy. Stuart Thomson (2000) has divided the explanations for the crisis of traditional social democracy into four categories – economic, sociological, political and institutional (see also Randall, 2003). We can consider these four terrains as moving from the external environment in which social democratic parties operate to the internal structures of social democratic parties. Economic theories emphasize changes in the international political economy. Sociological theories focus on the changing domestic social structure and electorate. Political factors include the international and domestic political and institutional context in which social parties act. Institutional theories focus primarily on the internal organization of social democratic parties.

a) *Economic Theories*

Even during the Golden Age, social democrats faced a dilemma. Social democrats sought to reform and regulate capitalism while maintaining the confidence or at least the acquiescence of capitalists. Social democracy was structurally dependent on the vitality of the market economy and private investment in order to implement economic and social reforms (Przeworski, 1985). Social democrats were therefore reluctant to challenge the prerogatives of capital and sought to dampen 'excessive' demands for wage increases or structural reforms that might undermine accumulation.

Golden Age social democracy was undermined by the economic turmoil that began to emerge in the 1970s. Economic theories of the crisis of social democracy emphasize the end of the long post-war boom, the fiscal crisis of the state, industrial restructuring and the process of globalization. The initial manifestation of the economic turmoil was internationally widespread inflation in the 1960s resulting from a combination of full employment and the American government's domestic and foreign policies (Sassoon, 1996: 362-363). The onset of stagflation in the 1970s led to a crisis of legitimacy for Keynesianism. To the extent that social democracy had become synonymous with Keynesianism, the impasse of Keynesian demand management in the 1970s undermined the political legitimacy of social democracy and left it without a distinctive economic program (Glyn, 2001).

The economic slowdown significantly reduced the room for manoeuvre for social democratic governments. Decreased revenues and increased costs for social transfers led to rising public sector debts and deficits. Stagnating living standards helped fuel tax fatigue, while business demanded tax cuts to restore profitability. Policies of fiscal restraint and public sector downsizing became more common. The British Labour government of 1974-79 was rocked by financial crisis and labour strife. Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan announced the death of Keynesianism in 1976 (Panitch and Leys, 1997: 117). Wage controls, whether negotiated or imposed from above, frequently became more rigorous. Social democratic corporatism became increasingly difficult to manage. This often led to labour strife, particularly among public sector workers. In Britain this resulted in Labour's political defeat and the shift to neo-liberalism. The American-led shift to a tight monetary regime broke the back of inflation by creating a major recession in the early 1980s. Growing interest payments magnified the public sector budget crisis.

The challenge for social democracy was made more acute by the process of economic globalization. The liberalization of trade and finance has been blamed for eroding national autonomy over macroeconomic policy and placing downward pressure on wage, taxation and social spending levels (Scharpf, 1991; Kurzer, 1993). As shifting investment and production from one country to another has become easier and the threat of exit has become more credible, capital has gained additional leverage vis-à-vis both labour and the state (Huber and Stephens, 1998).

The concept of globalization and the extent of the constraint it represents have been hotly contested. There is a vast institutionalist literature that examines different varieties of capitalism, in which specific institutional frameworks at the domestic level condition how countries respond to similar pressures from globalization and socio-economic change (Hall and Soskice, 2001). When confronted by external economic shocks, “specific institutional conditions...either facilitated or impeded the adoption and implementation of effective policy responses” (Scharpf, 2000: 21). Peter Hall concludes that organized market economies of the social democratic type in Europe “bring an important set of comparative institutional advantages to global competition” which allow them to sustain their distinctive trust-based forms of capitalism rather than converging on neo-liberalism (2001: 79). For many of these social democratic theorists, corporatist arrangements remain a central component of left strategies (e.g. Garrett, 1998; Rhodes, 2001). From this perspective, the continuing viability of social democracy depends upon the existence of domestic institutional structures that can sustain economic growth and efficiency, high levels of employment and low levels of inflation. With the breakdown of centralized wage bargaining in Sweden, other countries such as Netherlands and Denmark became new models for advocates of corporatism. Garrett goes so far as to suggest that “social democratic corporatism can, and should be exported outside Northern Europe” (1998: 155).

Without denying the impact of globalization, some theorists have depicted globalization less as an inevitable product of technology or markets and more as a political project of internationalizing capitalist classes that has been administered and constitutionalized by nation states (Panitch, 2001: 139-163). Globalization can perhaps be best understood as involving a capitalist offensive against the terms of post-war domestic class compromises (Wilks, 1996). Thus, corporatist partnerships are of less interest to capital and offer diminishing returns to labour (Albo, 1994; 1997). From this perspective, the different models all appear to be moving in the direction of neo-liberalism (Coates, 2005).

Industrial restructuring, depicted as a crisis of Fordism, is sometimes offered both as an explanation of the end of the Golden Age (Piore and Sabel, 1984; for other explanations, see Webber and Rigby, 1996; Brenner, 1998) and an explanation of the disintegration of the political base of social democracy. As such, it will be discussed in the following section which looks at the evolving social structure of contemporary capitalism.

b) Sociological Theories

The crisis of social democracy has often been attributed to sociological trends involving the changing class structure of advanced capitalist societies. Class structure based arguments have taken two main forms. The first is that the working class is disappearing. The second is that the working class has become increasingly diverse and divided. Both of these arguments have been used to suggest that old forms of class politics are obsolete and must be abandoned or altered. This view of the declining political significance of class has been most prevalent among studies of voting and elections. Indices of class voting suggest that class voting has declined across the

western liberal democracies in the post-war period (Franklin et al., 1992; Clark et al., 1993). However, this view has not gone unchallenged (Manza et al., 1995; Esping-Andersen, 1999). As Colin Hay notes, the perception that class voting was declining has, in turn, shaped social democratic electoral strategies. Then, by de-emphasizing appeals to working class voters, social democratic parties can in fact contribute to the process of dealignment (2003: 191-192).

Arguments that the working class is in decline or has disappeared are based upon a depiction of the working class as comprised solely of blue-collar industrial workers. It is true that this 'traditional' working class is diminishing in size as a proportion of the workforce in advanced capitalist countries. This process has been depicted as inevitably diminishing the prospects for social democratic parties (Przeworski, 1985; Przeworski and Sprague, 1986; see also Hobsbawm, 1981). A less deterministic reading suggests that it is necessary to analyze rather than dismiss the potential for social democratic support among the service sector workforce.

Based on an examination of the relations of production, the working class certainly still exists within advanced capitalist economies, but its composition is increasingly diverse and the kind of work performed has changed (Yates, 2002). Theories of post-Fordism and post-industrialism emphasize the significance of these changes. Post-Fordism suggests that the nature of production has changed from the classic Fordist regime of mass, standardized production based upon economies of scale to a post-Fordist regime of smaller-scale, 'flexible' production based upon economies of scope (Piore and Sabel, 1984). Post-industrialism emphasizes the employment shift from the industrial to the service sector and the related increase in female participation rates.

Post-Fordism is said to increase wage differentiation and job polarization, and break up the large-scale, high-wage, unskilled working class of Fordism (Kitschelt, 1999: 322). Thus post-Fordism breaks up the more homogeneous working class of post-war social democracy. Anthony Giddens argues that, "[i]t is skilled workers, especially 'symbolic workers', who are in demand in the knowledge economy, not unskilled workers, who are in fact threatened with marginality" (2001: 4). Post-Fordism has also involved a shift to smaller units of production, which Jonas Pontusson (1995) has argued is closely related to the decline of European social democracy.

In terms of post-industrialism, all advanced capitalist nations have experienced a shift of employment to the service sector and a simultaneous increase in female participation rates (Klaussen, 1999). Both of these trends can be seen as increasing the heterogeneity of the working class. Women's increased participation has placed pressure on labour markets to provide sufficient employment and on welfare states to provide necessary supports. Women's increased labour market participation has also contributed to falling fertility rates and the aging of the population which are expected to place increased fiscal pressures on the state (Mahon, 2000: 32). The impact of population aging and the pressure on pension and health care systems have become matters of some dispute (Pierson, 2001: 90-113).

The most prevalent vision of the post-industrial employment picture is not optimistic. According to Esping-Andersen (1999), there is an apparent trade-off between joblessness (the continental European model) versus a mass of inferior low-skill jobs either in the private sector (the American model) or the public sector (the Scandinavian model). As described by Iversen and Wren, "Employment growth can be achieved only in the private services sector, at a cost of higher levels of wage inequality; or in the public services sector, at a cost either of higher taxes or of higher deficits" (1998: 544).

Sociological change is also theorized as decreasing the salience of traditional working class material issues. Ronald Inglehart (1990) has argued that the prosperity of

the advanced capitalist countries in the postwar period led to the emergence of a post-materialist emphasis on belonging, self-expression and quality of life issues. The emergence of these post-materialist issues is presented as a challenge to social democratic parties. They may split the social democratic left between the supporters of traditional redistributive politics and the supporters of new “post-materialist” issues (Kitschelt, 1994, 1999). Similarly, for Giddens, the increasing importance of “life politics” means that the left/right distinction no longer has the same salience (1998: 44). In many countries, new political competitors such as Green parties arose from the new social movements to champion these post-materialist values.

The debate then centres on the impact of these sociological shifts upon social democratic support and the possibility of alliances between private and public sector workers and manual and non-manual workers. According to Frances Fox Piven (1992: 8), emergent forms of employment are less likely to develop solidarity and class consciousness among workers. Pontusson (1995) has argued that the decline of European social democracy is related to the growth of service employment in the private sector. The private service sector, with its smaller workplaces, is seen as less likely to generate class-consciousness and is harder to unionize.

Przeworski argues that the electorally necessary attempt to reach out to “the middle strata” weakens the class appeal of social democracy and involves a loss of support among “workers” (1985: 26-27). Kitschelt recommends that social democratic parties forget about “the shrinking traditional industrial working class” and “reach out to an electoral constituency built around sophisticated industrial technicians and engineers, white collar employees and middle managers, and the large sector of professionals in personal services” (1994: 301). Esping-Andersen (1999) is less deterministic about the choices for social democracy and suggests an electoral coalition between the “working class” and the “middle class” is possible, but needs to be constructed. He argues that the industrial working class is more likely to accept the need to adapt to international competition, while public sector workers defend high taxes, generous social benefits and the public sector (also Kitschelt, 1999: 322; Mahon, 2000: 42-43).

Political parties have been central to the Marxist project for the role they are expected to play in the development of class-consciousness (Przeworski, 1985). The lack of class-consciousness must be studied in relation to the past practice and strategies of parties and other working class organizations. An analysis that concludes that white-collar workers are not part of the working class because they lack working class consciousness ignores the role of parties and other social forces as intervening variables (Panitch, 1986: 12-13). Forging working-class unity and developing a sense of class-consciousness has always been a difficult political project rather than a pre-existing, objective reality (Brodie and Jenson, 1988).

c) Political Theories

Political theories of social democratic decline and repositioning focus on the battle of ideas and the battle among different social forces. The main political theories that attempt to explain the crisis and subsequent trajectory of social democracy emphasize the general shift of political discourse to the right and the rise of new political challengers for social democracy on the left and the right.

Ideological and intellectual trends since the late 1970s have not been kind to social democracy. Social democracy and Keynesianism came under attack from both the right and the left from the late 1960s onward. Even before the Thatcher and Reagan revolutions, neo-liberal theorists were waging an ideological war against the Keynesian welfare state for infringing upon individual liberties and encouraging dependency upon state handouts. Amid ‘full employment’ and economic growth, labour militancy and social

movement activism exploded in the late 1960s throughout most of the advanced capitalist world and beyond (Ross and Jenson, 1986: 31-32; Sassoon, 1996: 357-440). The new left criticized the hierarchy and bureaucracy of the welfare state (Paterson and Thomas, 1986: 9-10).

Intellectually, the social democratic left was pushed onto the defensive by the 1980s. Donald Sassoon suggests that social democracy has experienced a “poverty of theory” and lacks an “intellectual framework” to guide it (1998: 96). The difficulties faced by left governments, most notable the British Labour governments of 1974-1979 and François Mitterrand’s presidency in France, undermined confidence in left strategies amid economic crisis and globalization. With the crisis of Keynesianism and the electoral success of Thatcher and Reagan, the ideological climate, especially in the English-speaking countries, shifted to the right. The fall of Communism in Eastern Europe gave a further boost to those who equated capitalism with freedom and democracy. Capitalism and liberal democracy were portrayed as the “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992). Giddens is emphatic: “No one any longer has any alternatives to capitalism – the arguments that remain concern how far, and in what ways, capitalism should be governed and regulated” (1998: 43-44). As a result, for many social democrats, it became imperative to jettison any remaining hint of the old-fashioned language about class, socialism or public ownership.

As part of this shift, and helping to reinforce it, left intellectuals turned away from class analysis, Marxism and political economy (Wood, 1986; Miliband and Panitch, 1990). The academic revival of Marxism in the 1960s and 70s was short-lived and remained isolated from left parties and labour movements. Faced not only with a resurgent right-wing discourse, social democracy and working class theorizing in general came under attack from various critical theories. Post-modern and post-structuralist schools of thought attacked the ‘essentialism’ and the ‘meta-narratives’ of the left while often seeming to abandon any activist political project. Discourse analysis and deconstruction increasingly preoccupied academic debate, while Marxist debates were marginalized.

Similarly, the centrality of social democratic parties and labour movements within left politics has been challenged by the rise of social movement politics. Certainly, many left theorists looked beyond the working class to a variety of new social movements (Gorz, 1982; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Such movements have mobilized actors and raised issues beyond the electoral arena and challenged the priorities and strategies of social democratic parties. Some theorists attribute the rise of these social movements to the emergence of post-materialist values. Identity politics increasingly preoccupied political debate.

In trying to account for the electoral success of social democratic parties we need to examine their electoral competitors and the party systems in which they find themselves. For Kitschelt, a primary factor determining the success of social democratic parties is their placement in their party systems (1994, 1999). The existence, attractiveness and placement of electoral competitors on the left and right of social democratic parties are obviously important to investigate (Merkel, 1992: 147). Social democratic parties should benefit from a divided right and suffer amid a divided left, for example, the division between traditional social democracy and post-materialist parties. In many cases, however, new right-wing populist parties, occasionally of an extremist sort, have succeeded in appealing to the traditional working-class base of social democratic parties.

d) Institutional Theories

Relevant institutional or organizational theories of social democratic change focus on the structures of the state and of social democratic parties themselves. The decision-making ability of social democratic parties and their ability to respond to (or, in fact, to proactively shape) the economic, sociological and political context are conditioned by their institutional structures.

Parties in general, and not just social democratic parties, have been in a state of decline, or at least have been undergoing an institutional transformation since the 1960s (Meisel and Mendelsohn, 2001). Dalton and Wattenberg have suggested that “mounting evidence points to a declining role for political parties in shaping the politics of advanced industrial democracies” (2000b: 3). Parties face declining membership, partisan attachment and voter turnout. In general, parties have become more centralized, professionalized and leadership based (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000a). This general trend may present particular challenges to the classic social democratic “mass party” structure (Duverger, 1963). The hollowing out of social democratic party structures can be seen as seriously weakening the ability to sustain a social democratic vision and a solid electoral base.

Robert Michels’ thesis of the ‘iron law of oligarchy’ remains the classic critique of social democratic party organization. He argued that all organizations, through the necessary division of labour, become dominated by a small oligarchical leadership. Oligarchy develops through the need for expert leadership; the ability of leaders to control party administration and party conventions; the distance that develops between parliamentary caucus and party members; and the rank-and-file deference toward their leadership. Michels warned that the trend to oligarchy can be minimized, but that it could never be entirely avoided (1962: 370).

Social democratic parties may have always had oligarchical tendencies and a wide division between the leaders and the led, but during the post-war era they experienced a harmful “decline of intra-party life” (Panitch and Leys, 1997: 6). Educational and mobilizational capacities withered away. Panitch and Leys argue that:

The internal life of the social democratic parties had undergone a serious decline as a result of their integration into the institutions of ‘managed capitalism’. When the socialist vision gives way to the pragmatic management of capitalism, there is little scope or need for a party-based ‘counter-hegemonic’ community. Party branches continue to serve an electoral function and play their allotted role at party conferences, but they lose whatever significance they may have had – which of course varied from country to country – as centres of education and mobilisation, oriented to an alternative way of life. (1997: 6)

Thus, the hollowing out of social democratic party structures can be seen as seriously weakening the ability to sustain a social democratic vision and mobilize a solid social base.

Different party structures will place varying degrees of discretion in the hands of party leadership and varying degrees of control over leadership, at least in theory, in the hands of party members. The organizational structures themselves thus become subject to debate and struggle. Many social democratic parties faced significant internal strife from the late 1960s to the 80s (Bell and Shaw, 1994). Often these were ‘new left’ democratizing challenges which achieved some temporary successes in altering party structures before party elites were able to regain control.

Social democratic modernizers and their intellectual allies place much greater emphasis on the strategic flexibility of social democratic parties and leadership control

(Kitschelt, 1994; 1999). Strategic flexibility is considered necessary to allow the party to modernize and adapt to changing political values. Kitschelt argues that “the two major obstacles to strategic flexibility are an inert mass-membership organization...and a leadership that is strictly accountable to a large base of intellectually immobile organizational constituents” (1999: 329). In practice, Kitschelt argues that the main institutional change that is required is for social democratic parties to distance themselves from the trade unions who tend to be ‘conservative’ in the sense that they oppose moves toward either free-market or left-libertarian positions.

During the post-war era, most social democratic parties became ‘catch-all-parties’ that attempted to represent the ‘national’ interest (Kirchheimer, 1966), but they still maintained close relations with trade union movements. Relations between social democratic parties and labour movements throughout Western Europe have been transformed over the last twenty to thirty years (Howell, 2000). During the increasingly difficult context of the 1970s and 1980s, party-union relations became more contentious and strained. The initial thrust of renewal was to make the relations between parties and labour looser and more flexible (Hine, 1986; Taylor, 1993). More recently, according to Chris Howell, “contemporary social democracy is in the process of divorcing itself from organized labour” (2000: 9). As described by Ross and Martin, “Deteriorating relationships between unions and erstwhile party political friends have been remarkable...unions can no longer rely upon ‘party allies’ for influence over government policies” (1999: 377).

The contemporary political economy has “encouraged a collapse in the material bases of the close relationship between unions and Left parties” (Howell, 2000: 13). During the Golden Age, unions and social democratic parties developed an economic bargain that involved wage restraint in exchange for full employment, a higher social wage and other political gains. The corresponding political bargain dictated that unions would attempt to deliver their votes in exchange for a supportive political and legal framework for union organization and collective bargaining. These deals have been undermined by economic turmoil and globalization, which has limited the ability of left governments to deliver their side of the bargains. The working class has become more diverse and stratified undermining its ability to deliver wage restraint. Wage restraint is often now obtained through restrictive monetary policies rather than corporatist arrangements. At the same time, unions have become less able to deliver votes for social democratic parties.

Towards a Theorization of the Crisis and Transformation of the NDP

As noted above, a suitably nuanced account of the NDP’s trajectory in the 1990s requires a careful examination of the interplay between structures and agency, while balancing an awareness of both the domestic environment and the international context. In doing so, it becomes necessary to bring together insights from the Canadian political science literature on Canada’s political parties and the Canadian party system, the international literature on political parties and especially social democratic parties and the comparative political economy literature.

a) Economic Theories

It seems clear that the specific economic conditions which allowed post-war social democracy to develop a positive-sum compromise between labour and capital have passed. As the conditions changed, capital has refused to make the same sorts of concessions to the working class and has favoured tight monetary policy, fiscal restraint and flexible labour markets. The combined forces of economic crisis, economic

restructuring and the internationalization of capital have challenged social democrats everywhere.

Canadian social democrats faced a specific set of problems. Canada experienced a particularly severe recession in the early 1990s, exacerbated by the Bank of Canada's single-minded focus on price stability (Osberg and Fortin, 1998). The economic slowdown and high interest rates combined to create a significant fiscal squeeze. Federal government attempts to restrain their transfer payments to the provinces, added to the fiscal problems faced by New Democratic provincial governments in the 1990s.

Internationalization, or more specifically continentalism, was an issue for the Canadian left long before globalization became a popular buzzword. The Canada-US Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) have acted as an economic constitution for North America that entrenches neo-liberalism (Clarkson, 2002; McBride, 2005). Economic restructuring has had varied effects upon Canada's different regional economies. Ontario's industrial structure has undergone a dramatic restructuring in the face of increasing international competition. Resource dependent regions have continued to face boom-bust cycles at best and resource-depletion at worst. Overall, it is hard to avoid an emphasis on economic theories of the crisis and repositioning of the NDP.

The notion that new economic conditions have undermined the position of the NDP has been bluntly described by political journalist Jeffrey Simpson. He suggests that, "economic shifts...made old-style socialists and 1960s-vintage social democracy irrelevant at worst, marginally relevant at best" (2001: 86). Simpson approvingly cited the approach of Tony Blair, Gerhard Schroeder and the Saskatchewan NDP and called for a similar "modernization" of the federal NDP to create "a sober minded, pragmatic, moderately left-of-centre approach" (2001: 84, 86). Prominent social democrats have certainly emphasized the extent to which traditional social democracy is no longer a viable project (Rae, 1997; MacKinnon, 2003). Even left critics of the NDP have granted that the room to manoeuvre for Canadian social democracy was quite limited in the 1990s (Carroll and Ratner, 2005: 128).

Economic globalization, bolstered by NAFTA and the World Trade Organization, is clearly a constraint, but the extent to which globalization has diminished the autonomy of the Canadian state should not be overstated (Urmeter, 2005). Timothy Lewis reminds us that "Because economic globalization changes the resources available to domestic actors, it tilts the playing field of domestic politics in one direction or another; but it does not (indeed in its current form it cannot) simply determine the results of the game" (2003: ix). The context was certainly not favourable, but there may have been some possibilities for further reform for governments with a clear agenda and political will.

It is necessary to examine the response of New Democrats to this economic context. With the old Keynesian solutions either discredited or unacceptable to business, Canadian social democrats appeared disoriented in the 1990s. As R.S. Ratner notes "social democrats in Canada are either bewildered about the goals they should seek or are resigned to softening the rough edges of neoliberalism (2005: 156). The Ontario NDP government has been described as "bankrupt of any ideas" which led it to become "a prisoner of the hegemonic ideology" of neoliberalism (McBride, 2005: 39). Without a coherent plan or a mobilized base to move beyond Keynesian, the NDP governments of the 1990s quickly fell back to an emphasis on fiscal restraint and the creation of a sound environment for private investment. To fully understand the nature of the NDP's response to the environmental context, however, one must investigate the NDP's

electoral base, the political context in Canada and the institutional weaknesses of the party itself.

b) Sociological Theories

Over the last forty years, the Canadian working class has been transformed through mass immigration and the feminization of the labour force. The nature of work has changed due to the increasing importance of the service sector and the workplace restructuring variously described as 'post-fordism' or 'lean production.' The major shifts that have occurred in the composition of the labour force, the employment relationship and the kinds of work performed have been well documented.

These factors, along with the French-English divide, may have played a role in the relative historic weakness of social democracy in Canada, but they seem unlikely as explanations for the crisis of the NDP in the 1990s. Canada's class structure is a variation on a distinctly North American model. The percentage of the population engaged in industrial production peaked early in Canada (and the US) compared to Western European nations. Canada has long had a labour force concentrated in the service sector (Myles, 1991). Canada's female labour participation rate has also been relatively high by international standards (Daly, 2000: 469-470). In other words, the Canadian labour movement and the NDP have had to deal with a diverse working class since long before the onset of the generalized crisis of social democracy.

While Canada faced increasing economic turbulence and as Canada's class structure grew seemingly less favourable to social democracy, the NDP's electoral strength grew up until the early 1990s. The delayed crisis of the NDP (and the varied international record of social democratic parties) suggests that the structural factors of economic crisis and sociological change do not automatically undermine social democracy as a political project.

The NDP has certainly been faced with the challenge of attracting the support of diverse working class voters and balancing the interests of public and private sector workers, unionized and non-unionized workers. As well, the declining union density rate (especially in the private sector) is a major problem for leftist working class politics in Canada. The percentage of Canadian workers covered by a collective agreement declined to 32.2% in 2002 from 41.8% in 1984 (Jackson and Schetagne, 2004). However, these are political challenges for social democracy and not structural conditions that necessarily spell the end of social democratic politics. To a significant extent, it was the recession of the early 1990s that brought provincial NDP governments, especially in Ontario, into conflict with public sector employees. Of course, the nature of the conflict was shaped by the political strategies chosen by the NDP leadership. And those strategies were shaped by the larger ideological climate in which deficits were unacceptable and unions were dismissed as 'special interests'.

The party's relationship with labour has not met the expectations of either side. The formation of the NDP was an attempt to strengthen the ties with the labour movement that had always been disappointing for the CCF (Horowitz: 1968; Young, 1969; Azoulay, 1997). The link between labour and the party has always been much stronger at the leadership level than at the base of the union movement. The percentage of union members affiliated to the NDP peaked in the early 1960s (Archer, 1990: 37). The percentage of union members voting for the NDP has always been disappointing. The failure of this relationship to lead to electoral success led to ongoing debate over the nature of the relationship (Archer, 1990, 1991) and the role of labour within the party. Neither the unions nor the party can be pleased with the results obtained by their partnership. Yet, there is little to suggest that the Canadian class structure is necessarily unfavourable for social democratic politics. However, it is notable that the NDP's formal

relationship to labour has been restricted to specific sectors of the working class, the bastions of industrial unionism and the public service. The non-unionized and most marginalized workers certainly have no direct structural connection to the NDP.

c) Political Theories

As we apply economic and sociological approaches to the NDP we are merely looking at modest domestic variations from the international context of social democratic transformation. When we enter the domestic political realms, we are facing a more idiosyncratic group of factors.

It is hard to ignore the fact that the decline of the federal NDP's electoral fortunes in the 1990s was one part of a wider crisis in party politics in Canada. The 1993 election was perhaps "the greatest democratic electoral earthquake yet recorded" (Carty, Cross and Young, 2000: 32). Carty, Cross and Young (2000) have described the 1993 election as the turning point in the shift from Canada's third party system toward a fourth party system. From this perspective, "the story of Canadian party politics in the 1990s has been that of the failures of the old parties to accommodate to the forces of political, social, and governmental change" (Carty, Cross and Young, 2000: 6). This collapse of the third party system was due to voter cynicism, a corresponding desire for more direct participation, regional tensions, frustration with brokerage politics and the representational demands of an increasingly diverse electorate. The NDP was a product of the third party system with its pan-Canadian politics and the collapse of that party system threatened the continued viability of the party. While providing crucial insights into the domestic politics of party system change, this interpretation downplays the changing economic context which specifically undermined social democratic politics based on Keynesian policies. Still, the party system literature alerts us to the representational crisis in Canadian politics due to, among other things, an impasse of elite accommodation and regional brokerage politics. This was most clearly demonstrated in the constitutional debates over the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords.

In Canada, the economic and social priorities of social democracy have frequently been sidelined by issues of national identity, language, culture and region. Few other advanced capitalist countries have experienced the kind of mega-constitutional politics that pre-occupied Canada's political elite from the 1960s to 1992. As much as New Democrats (among others) wished the constitutional debate would just go away, they could not help but get tied up in the debate (Bradford and Jenson, 1991). The NDP has struggled to present a coherent, united and relevant position in these constitutional debates. On the one hand, the persistence of the constitutional issue has pushed the NDP to the sidelines. On the other hand, the federal party's willingness to support the constitutional initiatives of the federal government (whether in 1982, 1987 or 1992) have alienated certain regions and constituencies while solidifying the party's image as one of the old, traditional parties.

The federal party's embrace of the Meech and Charlottetown Accords turned out to be pivotal decisions that alienated many supporters. Rather than simply being evidence of an unfortunate tendency for constitutional issues to overshadow the social democratic issues like jobs and social programs, these Accords revealed the party leadership's alienation from its grassroots and the party's inability to develop a consistent and progressive position around the Constitution.

The Reform Party was given a boost by its opposition to the Charlottetown Accord and quickly grew to be a major political force. The Reform Party appealed to many former NDP voters particularly in western Canada, where it inherited the mantle of populist and protest politics (Carty, Cross and Young, 2000: 48). At the same time, the

resurgent federal Liberals were able to squeeze out the NDP by campaigning (if not governing) as the pragmatic and progressive alternative to the right wing Conservatives and Reform/Canadian Alliance.

The rise of the Reform Party was both a response to and a cause of the rightward shift of political debate in Canada. At the level of ideas, the NDP and traditional social democracy was on the defensive by the 1990s. Still, the provincial NDP victories of the early 90s defiantly demonstrated that the Canadian population had not completely embraced neo-liberalism. The Canadian corporate elite however, and their media spokespersons, were firmly positioned in the neo-liberal camp. The hostility of the media towards social democracy, especially but not only in BC, also placed great pressure on the NDP governments of the 90s (Carroll and Ratner, 2005).

On the left of the political spectrum, the NDP was losing its place of prominence as much of the political momentum and energy shifted to social movement activism. During the 1980s and 90s, a strong social movement sector including left-nationalists, environmentalists, feminists, and gays and lesbians became perhaps the most active and visible political force on the left. To some extent, these movements drained activist energy and resources away from electoral politics.

Relations between the NDP and the social movements were marked by mutual distrust (Bernard, 1994; Rebick, 1994). Social movement activists placed politically controversial demands upon NDP governments and were quick to criticize less than full compliance (Carroll and Ratner, 2005). New Democrats were critical of social movements for their non-partisan nature or disinterest in electoral politics (Mackenzie, 1994; Blaikie, n.d.). The relationship between social movements and the federal NDP were particularly tense during the campaign against the FTA (Ayres, 1998). Provincial NDP governments had tense relations with environmentalists, anti-poverty activists and the gay and lesbian movement (Archer and Whitehorn, 1997: 86-106; Stewart, 1998, 1999; Adkin, 1994, 1998).

The NDP's relationship with the women's movement is particularly instructive. The NDP has been relatively responsive to the issues of the women's movement and has played a leading role in increasing the number of women as leaders and candidates (Archer and Whitehorn, 1997: 86-106; 176-194; Young, 2000). However, relations between feminist organizations like the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) and the NDP have often been difficult. Tensions emerged between the party and feminists during the campaign against the FTA and the Charlottetown Accord referendum (Rebick, 2000). The Rae cabinet's links to the women's movement inspired high expectations that for some were only partially met (McCuaig, 1993; Burt and Lorenzin, 1997). Similarly, the Harcourt government in BC created a Ministry of Women's Equality which developed a 'gender lens' to facilitate gender inclusive policy-making, only to see it trumped by an informal 'business lens' (Carroll and Ratner, 2005: 112-113, 123-124).

Where the NDP did show leadership on gender issues, it may have hurt the party. It is important to note that the NDP was led by two successive female leaders in the 1990s. It was under their leadership that the NDP nearly faded away. In fact, the two parties which were nearly wiped out in the 1993 federal election were the two led by female leaders, the NDP and the Progressive Conservatives. This does raise questions about public and media perceptions of female leaders. Studies have suggested that female party leaders receive gendered media coverage (Gidengil and Everitt, 2003; Sampert and Trimble, 2003). Gidengil and Everitt have noted that "The singular lack of electoral success enjoyed by Campbell, McLaughlin and McDonough raises profound questions about the effect of these patterns of coverage on public perceptions of female leaders and on their parties' electoral fortunes" (2003: 574). The crisis of English-

Canadian social democracy can not be reducible to the leadership question, but it does appear that gendered media coverage increased the tendency for the NDP to fade into the background during the 1990s.

d) Institutional Theories

An emphasis on economic or sociological change runs the risk of putting too much stress on external conditions and overlooking the internal weaknesses of social democratic strategies and practices. It becomes necessary to investigate social democratic political strategy and the extent to which the hollowing out of social democratic institutions reduced the NDP's ability to respond to a changing economic context. To what extent did the NDP, without a strong culture of debate and popular mobilization, fail (or not even attempt) to develop class-consciousness among the changing working class or lead a struggle against the neoliberal offensive?

The institutional structure of the NDP suggests a number of avenues of investigation. The development of the CCF has been commonly depicted as the shift from movement to party (Zakuta, 1964; Young, 1969; Cross, 1974 for a critical review of this literature see Whitehorn, 1992: Ch. 2). These studies depict the CCF as succumbing to Robert Michels' 'iron law of oligarchy' as it became institutionalized and dominated by a small elite. The formation of the NDP is then portrayed as the culmination of the victory of the party over the movement. The increasingly reliance of the party upon professional opinion polling and other modern campaign tactics has been portrayed as typifying the victory of the party over the movement (Brodie, 1989).

Despite this overdrawn depiction of the CCF movement undergoing a process of institutionalization as the NDP, in many ways the central party has remained weak. The federal structure of the NDP has meant that much power and influence has remained within the provincial sections. In relative terms, the NDP has lacked financial resources and like all Canadian political parties has very little capacity to develop public policy.

The NDP has a federated party structure in which the federal party is, to some extent, subordinate to the provincial sections. As Carty, Cross and Young note, "This limited its capacity to act as an independent national organization in the manner of its Conservative and Liberal opponents" (2000: 66). Individuals could not join the federal party directly, but only through the provincial sections. The federal party was dependent upon financial transfers from the major provincial sections. At the same time, the powerful provincial sections have been divided along regional lines over economic and constitutional issues. Rather than being dominated by a small elite at the top as often depicted, the NDP faces a set of competing elites, including the leadership of the major provincial sections and the labour movement. One could also add, perhaps as a secondary tier, the institutionalized presence of various social movements.

The labour movement has provided a significant and stable source of funds for the NDP, but the party has always been at a financial disadvantage compared to its political competition. One strategy for countering the NDP's financial disadvantage has been to rely on large numbers of enthusiastic volunteers, particularly for canvassing (ONDP, 1964). Attracting sufficient volunteers to engage in this process is increasingly difficult. The changing nature of electoral campaigning (advertising, polling, focus groups, direct mail), a hallmark of the fourth party system, raises questions about the effectiveness of this model of electoral organization (Carty, Cross and Young, 2000: 171-210). Because of suspicion in NDP ranks and lack of funds, the NDP has traditionally been slow to experiment with the latest campaign methods and forms of communication.

Studies of the NDP have rarely examined the impact of campaign and party finance reforms of the early 1970s. The *Election Expenses Act* of 1974 had a significant

impact on the NDP by significantly reducing the financial gap between it and the two main parties. By the 1980s, the NDP was able to wage sophisticated national campaigns and was increasingly overcoming its opposition to utilizing the expertise of paid campaign professionals. Certainly by 1988, the NDP looked and sounded very much like a major party. It waged a leadership based brokerage campaign. For that specific election at least, this strategy was relatively successful in electoral terms but it further diminished the clarity of the party's message and identity.

The NDP's internal research capacities are limited. Political parties in Canada generally lack the capacity to engage in medium or long-term research or to engage in political education. One reason for this is the lack of partisan or affiliated think-tanks in Canada. In many other countries, there are closer relations both formal and informal between parties and think-tanks (Baier and Bakvis, 2001). The Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (RCEF) recommended that the political parties establish (and the state provide tax incentives for) party foundations or internal think tanks to foster political education and policy research (Canada, 1991: 297; see also Cross, 2004: 33-48). The NDP's Douglas-Coldwell Foundation has not played this role and there is no contemporary equivalent of the League for Social Reconstruction which played an important role in the early years of the CCF. It is perhaps no wonder that the NDP in the 90s was unsure of how to deal with either the economy or the constitution and generally struggled to define itself.

Conclusions:

During the 1990s, the New Democratic Party faced a domestically specific variant of common structural changes that have challenged social democratic parties throughout the advanced capitalist countries. These changes alone were not decisive in producing the NDP's crisis, rather the party failed to adapt in a manner that is politically viable and retains the core values and goals of social democracy. The response of the NDP was hindered by the institutional weakness of the party at the grassroots levels, its inattention to political education and policy research, its ineffective relationship with the labour movement and the party's federal structure.

The federal NDP failed to convince large number of Canadians that it was anything other than out-of-date and irrelevant. The NDP appeared unable to provide innovative or even workable solutions to Canadian problems, whether they were economic or constitutional. NDP governments in BC and Ontario barely moved beyond crisis management. In Saskatchewan, the NDP government benefited from modest expectations and competently adapted to difficult times by moving toward, rather than challenging, neoliberalism.

In all of this, the NDP experienced difficulties common to social democrats across the advanced capitalist countries. Social democracy appears to have failed as an economic model and as a political vehicle for change. In some jurisdictions, including Saskatchewan and Britain, it carried on a successful electoral machine, but the content of social democracy was diminished to an extent that it was barely recognizable as social democratic at all.

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