Sea Changes in Nova Scotia Politics

by Silver Donald Cameron

ISLE MADAME, NS –

To paraphrase (I think) Dalton Camp, in Nova Scotia's 1998 general election the Liberals won and lost, the NDP lost and won, and the Conservatives lost and lost. The incumbent Grits and the NDP ended in a dead heat, 19 seats each, while the Tories ran third with 14. It was the second successive delicious election for the NDP; in the 1997 federal election, the NDP had taken six of Nova Scotia's 11 seats; the Tories took the rest, and the Liberals were shut out altogether.

Either election might have been a fluke, but the two together suggest a pattern. In both cases, Nova Scotians punished the Liberals, turning rather more to the NDP than to the Tories. If that particular tide is still rising, Nova Scotia will wake up on the morning of July 28 with the first NDP government ever elected in eastern Canada.

Odd? Yes and no. Nova Scotia has a long but localized history of electing democratic socialists, dating back to the Cape Breton labour battles of the 1920s. Clairie Gillis of the CCF represented industrial Cape Breton in Parliament from 1940 to 1957, and in one postwar election a couple of Cape Breton CCFers constituted the entire Opposition, the Tories having been erased completely.

An NDP leadership tussle two decades ago created bitter resentment in Cape Breton, eroding the party's base there, handing Cape Breton to the Liberals and diverting the NDP's energies to Metro Halifax. Subsequently, however, the party grew steadily in Halifax, and recently it has begun to recapture Cape Breton. A well-connected businessman of my acquaintance sees this not as a temporary trend, but as a sea change. "Cape Breton," he says, "is undergoing a profound shift from the public sector to the private sector, and from the Liberals to the NDP." The Tories, meanwhile, have been increasingly confined to the rural mainland.

The strange thing is not that Nova Scotia may elect an NDP government, but that it has taken so long to get here. The Maritimes are often dismissed as hopelessly conservative; they are not, but they have a long experience of political futility which means that elections are not perceived here as being about issues or policies but about spoils. Canadian politics have an inherently imperial character; the great national issues reflect the relationship between Quebec and Ontario, and secondarily the relationship between the two central provinces and the hinterland.

Maritimers know from long experience that neither their opinions, their interests nor their ballots will greatly affect national developments. We have, for example, suffered disproportionately at the hands of the deficit-fighters, as even the Prime Minister has acknowledged. That's why the federal Liberals lost all their Nova Scotia members in 1997 -- including the once-mighty Dave Dingwall.

Maritime politics have therefore focussed on the things that provincial governments *can* affect -- road maintenance, schools and hospitals, the distribution of political favours. These are, of course, also the issues which most immediately affect our lives. But budget-cutting has de-fanged most of the traditional political threats and promises. The two traditional parties can't offer new spending, or threaten to take things away from rebellious constituencies. They've already taken the schools, the post offices, the wharves, the hospital beds. The dominant impression left by the outgoing Liberal minority government is one of bewildered people thrashing around desperately trying to do politics-as-usual in a situation which had fundamentally changed.

The NDP, by contrast, is particularly strong on community issues and has attracted a disproportionate number of community activists. It thus taps into deep cultural values. Nova Scotia villages and small towns are relentlessly sociable places. People really *know* one another -- and whatever their disagreements, they trust their neighbours and care profoundly for them. You don't lock your house, your car, your boat. You can count on a crowd assembling to help you with a major task -- launching a boat, roofing a house,

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throwing a party. The 1500 people in the parish of D'Escousse recently held a fundraising event for a gravely ill woman; they raised $11,000 in a single day. Such people view their society not as an arena for Darwinian competition, but as a vital source of mutual aid.

In a world of shrinking governments and rapacious corporations people turn naturally to one another for support. Social democratic governments now rule all the major nations of Europe. The campaign has three weeks yet to run -- but in the early going, all the signs suggested that Nova Scotians were ready to follow the European example.

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