

"LABOUR'S LOVE LOST"by John L. Fryer

In the run up to the forthcoming NDP leadership campaign at least one of the candidates, neophyte NDP'er Nils Jensen, is proposing that the institutional ties between the party and the province's unions be weakened, if not severed entirely. Whether Mr. Jensen's proposal to the party is fuelled by either tremendous naivety or incredible chutzpah he is, nevertheless, quite right. The time has come to sever the ties for reasons of modernization, practicality as well as morals.

The genesis of the current relationship was the 1958 general election sweep of John Deifenbaker's Progressive Conservatives. The battered CCF was reduced to only two seats. The newly created Canadian labour Congress (formed by the merger of two previously rival federations—the Trades & Labour Congress and the Canadian Congress of Labour) came to the rescue by agreeing to CCF secretary David Lewis's proposal to create a "new" labour oriented party. A key driving force behind the structure of the new party was the CLC's political director George Home. George was originally from Glasgow and wanted the new party to follow the British Labour Party model of union affiliation with which he was familiar. At the 1961 founding convention of the NDP in Ottawa the party constitution provided for such affiliation together with a special delegate entitlement formula for these affiliated unions.

But in the more than 40 years since then times have changed. On November 9th 1989 the Berlin Wall came crumbling down and with it the myth that somehow behind the Iron Curtain a worker's paradise had existed. Social Democratic parties the world over began to deal with the new global realities. The best known example is that of Great Britain where the Labour Party began the agonising process of deleting the "nationalize everything" clause from its constitution as well as dramatically re-evaluating the role of the unions within the party. Neil Kinnock began the process, John Smith followed him and finally Tony Blair completed the task. The reward? two back to back massive majorities at the polls with yet another one predicted.

Now for the practical reasons. B.C.'s NDP was trounced in the 2001 election and reduced to just two seats. The victors call themselves "liberals" but in reality are nothing but the same old right wing coalition that has governed our province so many times in the past. British Columbians know this and they want, deserve and positively need, a choice. But they do not want that choice to be hidebound with old ideas. Nor do they want it to be unduly influenced or beholden to one particular interest group. And they certainly don't want the President of the B.C. Federation of Labour to have an ex officio seat at the cabinet table.

The third reason for change is a moral one. George Orwell writing about pigs in "Animal Farm" wrote that "all animals are equal but some are more equal than others" Surely, no modern political party can defend such a notion. The NDP constitution should be changed. All memberships should be individual with each member having just one vote. The B.C. NDP should pledge to follow the lead of Quebec's Parti Québécois, of Gary Doer's Manitoba New Democrats and, yes, even Jean Chretien's Liberals, in passing a law to prohibit donations from corporations and unions. To permit only those from individuals with a strict limit as to amount.

Union leaders, activists, staff members and rank and filers should all be urged to join the NDP as individual members and play a full role in party affairs. If they fancy running for office then do as I did when running against Deputy Prime Minister John Manley in the 1988 "free trade" election. Take an unpaid leave of absence and take your chances with the electorate.

So it is high time for change in NDP politics-lots of change. Ending the institutional linkage between the party and the unions is a critical first step. For a party that stands so fervently for equality it is time "to walk the walk". The result could well surprise us all.

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