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Why We Lost in 2013

Every day is a gift. It is a fresh opportunity to tackle what you've left undone previously. It is a fresh opportunity to do better what you had tried to do before, but had not done well enough. It is a fresh opportunity, but one that always comes with its own history.

On the morning of March 25, 1998 I rose early and walked downtown heading to City Hall and my day's work as a councillor. The day after any election always has a small but distinct feeling of change. Certainly that is apparent on the streets. The candidate signs, which had been a colourful feature of the streetscape (and for some, a bit of an aesthetic nuisance), have been mostly removed, crews having collected them overnight. Minds have moved on. For those heavily involved, the immediate pressure of a campaign has dissipated. Winners and losers have had a small amount of time to adjust and to think about what comes next. And so it was. In the previous day's election, the NDP had jumped forward, winning nineteen seats in the Nova Scotia Legislature, a tie with the incumbent Liberals, and the first time so many Dippers had been elected in the province. I was among them. The news was dominated by the results. The air of change was aided by some early spring mildness.

As I strolled along Spring Garden Road, thinking it over, I passed restaurants and coffee shops, with big windows facing the street. The same thing happened at two of them: as I passed by, people got up from their seats and applauded. This was completely stunning. Wonderful, but

stunning. It was a moment that has stayed with me as one of the most remarkable in many years of political experience.

I waved. Probably I beamed. But I did not view this as a personal compliment. It was the result of history. It had to do with the long years Alexa McDonough had spent leading the Party and building its credibility. It had to do with the hard work of NDP MLAs like John Holm. It had to do with the attractiveness of Robert Chisholm as an enthusiastic young leader. Clearly it expressed something critical. People had voted for significant change. They were looking for it. They were looking for politics to be done differently in our province. They had hopes. And they had chosen the NDP as the vehicle of those hopes. In crucial respects, since finally becoming Government in 2009, we let them down. I apologize.

Apologies are complex matters. I can apologize on my own behalf, though indeed, as I hope will emerge, I have done my best over time to speak up at the caucus table for core progressive principles and measures. So for myself, I apologize for problems with the results, not so much for my efforts. An apology is a very personal undertaking. Thus it is not possible to apologize on behalf of others. They have their own thoughts to think, and their own conclusions to reach. Apologies imply a hope for some forgiveness. And they have to be assessed as to sincerity, coupled with actual solid indications of change in behaviour.



Being interviewed by the media.

At the NDP convention in 2014, interim leader Maureen MacDonald started her speech with what sounded like an apology, but turned out not to be. It has been depressingly clear that the party leadership remains blind to what led to the 2013 defeat. Maureen claimed, “We get it.” Very few in the room were convinced. For her examples of errors she cited the economy, being too ambitious, and communications. What the government did wrong about the economy, she said, was fail to get enough jobs in place soon enough. In her press conference afterwards, she specified the Halifax Convention Centre as an instance; apparently the only problem she saw is that the Centre is not being built fast enough. Traditional party supporters – virtually all opposed to this boondoggle project – have been outraged. This was no apology, not to party members, not to the public. We have a long way to go.

Fundamental to understanding why we lost in 2013 is a correct understanding of why we won in 2009. The party leadership was and remains convinced that the win came through centrism. But that is not so. A strong part of the win came from having held out the promise of being different. The failure to act as a Government in the ways suggested when we were the Opposition proved fatal.

The newspaper headlines in 2009 read, “Orange Crush,” a triple ambiguity: the orange team had crushed its opponents; a baffling reference to the popular sweet drink (Attractive but with limited nourishing qualities?); and the voters had a crush on the orange team (Momentarily intense but destined not to last?). All prophetic, as it turned out.

A cynical political aphorism runs as follows: “No matter who you vote for, they turn out to be the government.” Such an attitude can be simply humor, mild cynicism, or even bitter disappointment. Higher expectations for government is something the NDP promoted while in Opposition, benefited from in 2009, and then suffered from in 2013 as voters slumped in their support through disappointment. “As ye sow, so shall ye reap.” (*Job 4:8*) Or as is said in more secular circles, “What goes around, comes around.”