

## Who will lead the NDP? Who cares!

By JEFFREY SIMPSON

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VANCOUVER -- The New Democratic Party has been whining that the media and the Canadian public are not paying attention to its leadership race. Judging by this week's all-candidates' debate in Vancouver, the media and public can be forgiven.

Watching paint dry would have been livelier than suffering through the "debate," a misnomer for six candidates agreeing with each other on everything, and doing it with platitudes that demonstrated that the NDP remains locked in a serious time warp.

In the past three elections, the federal NDP won about half as many votes as it did in the elections from 1963 to 1988. You would have thought a bulb would have lit up on somewhere in the party to indicate the obvious: that the party is increasingly marginal, and that marginality comes from moving further away from the Canadian mainstream. But no, here we have six candidates regurgitating the same stuff that produced the marginality. Worse, some of their positions are not only daft, but dangerously daft.

The six of them, for example, outdid each other bashing the United States and President George W. Bush. You don't have to agree with much that Mr. Bush is doing at home and abroad to realize that for Canada, knee-jerk anti-Americanism is counterproductive. Calling Mr. Bush the "biggest menace to world peace," or someone who stays awake at night figuring out how many Iraqi babies he can kill (I'm not making this up), and similar stuff is delusional, dangerous and a recipe for marginality.

On the Middle East, if these six leadership candidates represent the NDP's sentiments, then Israel is the party's villain and the Palestinians the heroes, except, of course, for passing criticism of suicide bombers. A mixture of utter naiveté about the complexities of the Middle East, combined with a reflexive tendency to blame Israel, is another muddled combination that underscores the NDP's shaky grip on world affairs.

We heard from all of them, too, about the United Nations and its importance for Canadian foreign policy. But when asked if Canada should join in a UN-sanctioned attack on Iraq, every one of them reversed field and said no. Talk about having things both ways.

Those aching for a pragmatic, progressive party of the left could only watch that debate, and the entire leadership race, with despair. If the adage is true that power corrupts, the federal NDP reveals the opposite: that sustained lack of power also corrupts.

It corrupts, not in the power-wielding sense of encouraging arrogance and venality, but by leading to a cast of mind whereby the complexities and compromises necessary for serious governing are overwhelmed by slogans, bombast, extravagant rhetoric and ideological nostrums that work up the faithful and turn off everybody else.

This form of corruption is the NDP's fault, as Canadians have repeatedly signalled in recent elections. If that corruption is sustained, then it only matters a little who among the six candidates wins the late January convention.

But one of them will win, so who will it be? Either Manitoba MP Bill Blaikie or Toronto Councillor Jack Layton.

The party has chosen a new method for selecting the leader that involves a mixture of one person, one vote and a quarter of the total votes reserved for the affiliated trade unions. A lot of people will vote by

vote and a quarter of the total votes reserved for the animated trade unions. A lot of people will vote by a preferential ballot before the convention; others will vote that day on-line, and still others will show up at the convention itself.

With six candidates, a first-ballot victory by Mr. Layton or Mr. Blaikie seems unlikely, even though only they and Saskatchewan MP Lorne Nystrom will have any appreciable support.

Mr. Layton might be the preferred second-choice candidate of the three marginal candidates; Mr. Blaikie will likely be the second choice for a majority of the Nystrom supporters. It might be very close between the two of them, but that's a guess given the vagaries of the one person, one vote system.

Mr. Layton speaks French, a useful asset for a national leader. Mr. Blaikie does not. Mr. Layton has the Svend Robinson lefties on side, but he also picked up the surprising endorsement of Ed Broadbent, surprising because Mr. Broadbent should have stayed above the fray as a respected former leader. Mr. Layton is clever with a phrase, knowledgeable about certain urban issues, but also begs the question about how much there is there.

Mr. Blaikie has parliamentary experience, a long history in the party and a bona fide social conscience. He's got more of the party establishment on side.

The NDP is about to change leaders, but a party so resistant to change isn't going anywhere -- regardless of who's on top.

[jsimpson@globeandmail.ca](mailto:jsimpson@globeandmail.ca)