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Canada's opposition

Harper and the void

The death of Jack Layton leaves the opposition leaderless. How the gap is filled may reshape Canadian politics

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STATE funerals are a rare honour in Canada, usually restricted to former prime ministers, governors-general and prominent cabinet ministers. Yet on August 27th Jack Layton, leader of the opposition New Democratic Party (NDP), who died of cancer on August 22nd at the age of 61, will be laid to rest in Toronto with all the pomp and solemn ceremony that official Canada can muster. The decision to offer a state funeral, made by Stephen Harper, the Conservative prime minister, and accepted by the Layton family, is a tribute to Mr Layton's personal appeal and to his achievement in re-drawing Canada's political map. It is also an acknowledgment of the void he leaves behind.



At the federal election in May Mr Layton led the NDP, a perennial left-of-centre fringe party, to a triumph that in its way was more remarkable than Mr Harper's winning of a parliamentary majority after five years as a minority prime minister. The NDP took 103 seats (up from 37) in the 308-seat House of Commons, becoming the official opposition and humiliating the Liberal Party and the separatist Bloc Québécois, whose leaders both resigned. So Mr Harper now bestrides Canada's political stage, bereft of rivals. But it will be what the NDP does next that determines when, and above all how, Mr Harper's dominance might end.

The NDP was born in 1961 as an uneasy alliance of prairie populists and urban trade unionists. On becoming its leader in 2003, Mr Layton made the party electable by distancing it from the unions and shifting towards the centre ground long occupied by the Liberals. His sunny personality—he was known as Smiling Jack in English-speaking Canada and *le bon Jack* in Quebec—helped. His biography spanned Canada's divides: he was born in Montreal, was equally fluent in English and French, and forged his political career in Toronto.

Having managed to win only one seat in Quebec at the 2008 election, this year the NDP won 59 (of a total of 75) in the French-speaking province. The party turned itself into the beneficiary of the unpopularity of the Liberals, weakened by scandal and poor leadership, and of widespread disenchantment with the separatism of the Bloc Québécois. It helped that federal political subsidies, now being phased out, allowed Mr Layton to mount a professional campaign.

He will be a hard act to follow, not least because death deprived him of the chance to consolidate

his triumph. His successor's first task will be to hold together a disparate parliamentary group, divided between left-wingers and moderates, between vestigial socialist centralism and the Quebec contingent's desire for devolution. The next is to ensure that it is the NDP that profits from any disillusion with the Conservative government.

One way to achieve that would be for the party to merge with the Liberals. That is more likely if the NDP chooses Thomas Mulcair as its new leader. A former Liberal cabinet minister in Quebec, he has spoken in favour of a coalition between the two parties (an idea mooted by Mr Layton in 2008). As the NDP's sole Quebec MP prior to the election, he is less unknown than many of his colleagues. "If you ask any Quebecker to name their [NDP] MP, they would probably struggle," says Robert Asselin, a political scientist at the University of Ottawa. "They would say, I voted for Jack."

Alternatively, the party could choose one of its longtime stalwarts from the west (such as Libby Davies, a Vancouver MP), who have spent their entire political lives fighting the Liberals and see any coalition or merger as consorting with the enemy. But ignoring the Quebec wing and slipping back towards the left is probably a formula for fading into political obscurity once again.

A new NDP leader is unlikely to be chosen until early next year. As for the Liberals, their interim leader, Bob Rae, is a former NDP premier of Ontario and is sympathetic to a coalition. But any marriage might not be consummated until a Liberal leadership convention, due in 2013.

All this means that when parliament reconvenes on September 19th, Mr Harper will face less exacting scrutiny. "To use a hockey analogy, he's alone on the ice," says Mr Asselin. Some of his supporters will want him to use this enviable position to ram through pet policies like banning abortion or bringing back capital punishment. But Mr Harper is a cautious man, with a fine ear for Canadian tolerances. Smaller government, lower taxes, reducing the deficit and managing the economy will remain his themes. They proved popular with voters in May. His eye, like those of the opposition parties, is on the election in four years' time.

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