

Dan Azoulay, *Keeping the Dream Alive: The Survival of the Ontario CCF/NDP, 1950-1963* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 1997)

Twice, in the 1940s, the CCF was the Official Opposition in the Ontario Legislature, only to be reduced to near oblivion with only two seats in 1951. Originally, Dan Azoulay planned his study to move swiftly through the uneventful years of the fifties, to the resurgence of the sixties, and the regaining of the Official Opposition in the mid-seventies.

"What I discovered instead," Azoulay states in his Introduction, "was a period in the CCF/NDP history as compelling and dramatic as any other, and which as a result warranted a more in depth examination...the party underwent a painstaking innovation, and at times heroic rebuilding process...there is as much to be gained from studying failure as from studying success."

*Keeping the Dream Alive* is the definitive study of the CCF/NDP in the years 1950-63. It is highly unlikely that any other historian is going to explore in such meticulous detail the archival records of the party during what was dismissed as the "stagnant years." Survival in those years made possible the later fulfilment of the democratic socialist dream. Azoulay's study will remain the authoritative foundation chapter in any history of the Ontario party.

What was so compelling, so dramatic, in those years? The devastating defeat of 1951 opened up ten years of rank-and-file lethargy so that it was a desperate struggle to maintain a membership base. Not only was there disillusionment from the 1951 defeat but the Cold War atmosphere was hostile to all parties of the left. The public was not in a mood for change and the Communist effort to infiltrate or identify with the CCF provided constant fodder for the propaganda mills of business and the old parties. Although the provincial leadership of the CCF set basic organization as its top priority, every year it proved difficult even to maintain memberships at their sharply reduced levels. Low memberships meant that the party's financial base narrowed to the point where it was difficult to maintain a viable political operation. For years in relentless succession membership and finance drives faced an unyielding rank-and-file lethargy, usually with little or no improvement.

The situation was aggravated by internal differences. In the early fifties a Ginger Group contended that a small bureaucratic clique was wresting control of the party from the membership, and constantly tried to unseat the provincial leadership which was striving to maintain a basic organization. In later years this opposition evolved into a campaign calling for more education of the existing membership rather than an emphasis on seeking new members. While not downgrading the importance of education, the provincial leadership opted to seek new members, with education to follow.

The account of this struggle may sound mundane, but with memberships slipping, rank-and-file lethargy persistent, and finances inadequate for normal operations, let alone the extra required for elections, the heroic effort to survive has qualities that are both compelling and dramatic.

At the same time, there was an effort to change the party's image from being Depression-inspired to one that was more relevant in a period of postwar prosperity. In

1956 the Winnipeg Declaration replaced the 1933 Regina Manifesto as a statement of the party's basic philosophy. And it was followed by moves, in the party and the united trade union movement, for a fundamental restructuring of the forces of democratic socialism.

Azoulay's account of the evolution from the CCF to the NDP is once again presented in meticulous detail drawn from the official records. It was not an easy process, but rather one fraught with tension between the CCF, determined to maintain and strengthen its base, and the trade union movement whose leadership struggled to meet its day-to-day responsibilities while pursuing new political goals toward which many of the rank-and-file were lukewarm. That this process climaxed in a founding convention that was one of the most exciting in Canada's political history is certainly compelling, and replete with drama.

Unfortunately, the euphoric atmosphere of that achievement did not give the party the lift which the leaders had hoped for. Walter Pitman had been elected from Peterborough to the House of Commons as a New Party MP even before the convention. But the tendency to relax after the monumental effort in founding a new party, combined with a surfeit of by-elections, two federal and one provincial elections, all in 1962-63, meant that the continuing work needed for building the new party was neglected. The struggle of the fifties continued into the sixties; the high promise of the New Party was delayed for some years.

The record in Ontario provincial elections is a reflection of the limited achievements of those years. Having been reduced to two seats in 1951, it increased to three in 1955; to five in 1959; and to seven in 1963. Progress, yes — but a prolonged effort before Official Opposition status was regained in 1975.

Politicians are often ill-at-ease with an historian's account of events in which they participated. I was very much involved all through the stagnant years, before 1953, as national treasurer and organizer, and after 1953, as provincial leader. But nowhere throughout *Keeping the Dream Alive* did I find myself in disagreement with Azoulay. His facts are solidly drawn from the official record; his interpretation of events never jarred with my recollection. When I think of Fred Young, Ken Bryden, Doc Ames, Marj Pinny, Peg Stewart et al, I concur with Azoulay's conclusion: "It is the story of struggle and survival, of people fighting to save an institution that they believed had been, and could still be, a force for positive social change in a province that had traditionally accepted change only in measured doses."

For Azoulay's complete study of these years, reference should also be made to his essay "Winning Women for Socialism: The Ontario CCF and Women, 1947-61" published in *Labour/Le Travail* (Fall, 1995). Here too, in his characteristically detailed manner, he provides an account of the collective efforts of women through the party's Women's Committee, as well as the role played by many of them as top officers. Certainly, women played a major role in keeping the dream alive during the struggle for survival.

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