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Canada's Pulse

Memo to NDPers: Don't drop "New" — discard "Party"

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The clock ran out before delegates at the federal NDP's recent convention could debate a proposal to rename the party. But pondering is likely to continue. Some delegates want to delete "New" from the party while others suggested the Social Democratic Party.

The voters are indifferent to the idea.

- 45% of those polled supported removing "New" from the NDP while 20% were opposed and 35% had no opinion in a national survey by Angus Reid Strategies (August 11-12).

Among people who voted NDP in the 2008 federal election, 59% supported "Democratic Party" while 23% were against the change (18% had no opinion).

In a test conducted August 6-9 by Harris/Decima, the name Democratic Party cost the NDP support.

- Overall, 78% said changing the name to simply Democratic would have no effect on whether they vote NDP, 6% said it would make them more likely to support the party, while 11% said less likely.

Nationally, 36% said the Democratic Party is a good idea while 31% said it would be a bad idea (33% had no opinion one way or the other).

A new name is an opportunity to get non-NDP voters to reconsider the party without the risk of losing the party's current supporters.

Of course, re-naming the NDP the Democratic Party doesn't begin to exhaust the options. Successful political parties don't have to be called a "party." The Bloc Québécois is the country's most successful party, considering the share of its candidates who won in 2008 (67%).

Italy had a Forza Italia ("Go, Italy") government. Nicolas Sarkozy leads the Union for a Popular Movement. Poland's ruling party is Civic Platform. Angela Merkel heads Germany's Christian Democratic Union. The ruling Dutch party is the Christian-Democratic Appeal. Finland's most popular party this summer was the National Rally.

The word "party" inhibits creative thinking. Few people belong to a political party or take their problems to a party. There's no sparkle in the word. To get a vote-grabbing name, every word in NDP should be re-thought.

Terrific brand names seldom describe their product. The company called Google isn't Google Search Engine Inc. Good names are not always related to the products they publicize. When the name is right the product becomes known by the brand. Think of Kleenex, Scotch Tape, Blackberry and Band-Aids. Amazon is better known as a game-changing retailer than a river. There are computers and there are Apples. You search the Internet by googling.

People at the Brand Identity Guru Inc. of Boston, who have worked for SunLife, Coke and Reebok, say a great name is “the story about what makes you different from your competitors and the emotional tug that connects you with your audience—all in one or a few words.”

As a federalist party, New Democrats can co-opt the emotional hook of Canada and run as Canadian Way or Canadian Future (in Québec, the melodic L'avenir du Canada).

Certainly more than a new name's required to steer the NDP to power.

In 44 national polls taken this year, the party has never cracked 20% support and has been as low as 12% (in the Ipsos Reid February 24-March 5 poll). In eight surveys the NDP got 14%, most recently in the August 18-20 Ipsos Reid poll in the days following the party convention.

When Angus Reid Strategies asked a representative sample about the virtues of the federal parties August 11-12, voters trashed the NDP. Mario Canseco, a vice president of the polling company, commented, “For the NDP, the main problem is the negative perception on abilities. The party evokes inefficiency, weakness and foolishness for about a third of Canadians.”

One reason the federal NDP lags is that few voters picture leader Jack Layton as a prime minister. In a July 30-August 2 Nanos Research poll, just 15% said he'd make the best PM versus 26% for the Liberals' Michael Ignatieff and 30% for Stephen Harper. In an April Nanos survey, voters calling Layton best on trust, competence and “having a vision for Canada” totaled 37% compared with 65% for Ignatieff and 92% for Harper.

Another explanation why more voters don't support the party is the federal NDP's damaged brand. In a Strategic Counsel poll (May 26-28) for The Globe and Mail, only 14% said the NDP “has the best new ideas for Canada.” Merely 9% said it's “best able to manage the economy” (24% said the Liberals, 26% the Conservatives).

Not even NDP voters feel the home team is the most competent in economic management. Only 50% of NDP voters picked the NDP compared with 72% of Liberal supporters who said the Liberals are the most competent economic managers and 80% of Tory voters who picked the Conservatives.

Hitting the NDP restart button is urgent. As voters grow fatigued with minority government, there is the growing threat that the bigger parties will squeeze the NDP out of seats.

Faced with the choice of a Liberal or Conservative government, voters said they prefer a Liberal government by 44% to 33% over the Conservatives, in a July 2-5 Harris/Decima national survey. Some 30% supported a Liberal majority, 14% a Liberal minority, 24% favoured a Conservative majority and 9% a Tory minority.

Harris/Decima senior vice-president Jeff Walker observed that “Canada’s five-year experiment with minority government appears to have sparked a desire for majority governments to return. It appears that Canadians feel that minority governments accomplish less... than majorities.”

NDP supporters would like a party name that communicates feelings of inclusion, equity and concern for the working class. Ideally the name conveys the passion of party activists and also gives voters confidence that an NDP government won’t wreck the economy.

The trouble is that favourite leftish terms such as solidarity, movement, unity or union send the wrong message. Today’s voters think of themselves as individuals not groups or markets. Think of a party of one.

Voters want candidates who are mavericks — women and men who will stand up to their party if necessary. They want MPs who are “nobody’s candidate but ours.”

As with all effective political messages, the NDP's search for a new name should start with the voters. It's not about the party. It's about us.

Consultants who brainstorm names for brands and businesses would christen the NDP with something cool and clever but not trendy, a little sassy but not weird — a name that recalls the party roots but is up-to-the-minute, too. A name like Tommy.

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**10 party names reflecting NDP roots and values
that also trigger positive voter emotions:**

- 1 The Public Enterprise
- 2 Time for Canada
- 3 Tommy
- 4 Partnership for Democracy
- 5 Consensus for Change
- 6 Canadian Independence
- 7 Design for the New Canada
- 8 Agreement for Progress
- 9 Bold Future
- 10 Canadian Strategy