

BOOK REVIEW

Seeking Social Democracy: Seven Decades in the Fight for Equality, by Ed Broadbent with Frances Abele, Jonathan Sas and Luke Savage. Toronto: ECW Press, 2023. \$38.95, hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-77041-738-0. Pages: 1-309.

Reviewed by Matt Fodor¹

Seeking Social Democracy: Seven Decades in the Fight for Equality is a collection of short essays and long-ranging interviews with former NDP leader and elder statesman Ed Broadbent. The book offers a rich and wide-ranging discussion on the theory and practice of social democracy, in Canada and around the world, from the perspective of both theorist and practitioner.

The format of *Seeking Social Democracy* is modelled on that of *Thinking the Twentieth Century*, a collaboration between the late historian Tony Judt and interviewer Timothy Snyder, which Snyder described as a combination of “history, biography and political treatise.” The book is divided into three main sections: three chapters on Broadbent’s life growing up, university education and intellectual influences, and election as an MP from Oshawa, the main section of five chapters covering his tenure as NDP leader from 1975 to 1989, and two final chapters on his life since stepping down as leader in 1989, covering up until the present day. Broadbent is interviewed by retired Carleton University professor Frances Abele, policy analyst Jonathan Sas, and Jacobin editor Luke Savage.

Growing up during World War II and the immediate postwar years, Broadbent described his native Oshawa as “working class but by no means poor,” where the “benefits of a strong union – in this case – the United Automobile Workers – were readily apparent.” The first member of his family to attend university, Broadbent studied philosophy as an undergraduate at the University of Toronto in the mid-1950s, where he first engaged with socialist literature “of the social democratic and anti-communist variety.” Broadbent switched to political science for his Ph.D. so he could study with political theorist C.B. Macpherson.

According to Broadbent, Macpherson maintained that “the egalitarian parts of liberalism and the freedom of individuals to flourish – were undermined by its long-standing allegiance to capitalism and its promotion of a market society”; Broadbent credits Macpherson for “showing how capitalism was, by definition, exploitative.” Broadbent was also influenced by the work of John Stuart Mill, particularly in political economy, which was the subject of his doctoral dissertation. According to Broadbent, Mill combined, “the cooperative ethic of socialism” with “the importance of competition” in order to prevent a monopoly of power in the state or the economy.” Broadbent’s academic study and critical reading of Mill became “the intellectual foundation” for the ideas he championed in his political career. The two most important ideas were “a commitment to equality” and “a commitment to decommodification.”

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Broadbent joined the department of political science at York University in 1965, but entered electoral politics just three years later, running for MP in Oshawa in the ‘Trudeaumania’ election of 1968, where he narrowly defeated a long-serving Conservative MP. Broadbent’s entry into politics coincided with the rise of the New Left which questioned the Keynesian welfare state and consumer society and left-nationalism which demanded greater public ownership and economic independence from the U.S.

Broadbent was also initially involved in the Waffle, where he wrote the section on industrial democracy, but soon distanced himself from the final document over its rhetoric. Moving closer to the mainstream, Broadbent ran for the leadership in 1971 against David Lewis (as well as Waffle leader James Laxer) – a move Broadbent later regretted as the greatest mistake of his political career. The expulsion of the Waffle by the NDP in 1972 – which created a wedge between left intellectuals and the party – unfortunately goes undiscussed.

By the time Broadbent was elected to the federal NDP leadership in 1975, the world had fundamentally changed. As Broadbent notes: “It was...the end of the postwar boom in the West – the Golden Era of capitalism that consolidated a significant cross-political consensus in support of an expanding roster of social programs and public responsibility for full employment.” The postwar consensus would soon be under assault as politics moved to the ideological right. At the same time, the NDP became more attuned to such issues as feminism, LGBT rights, racial equality and Indigenous rights.

Broadbent also sought to make the NDP a contender for power, and it was under his leadership that the party first adopted modern campaign techniques and hired professional pollsters. The 1972-74 minority parliament achieved progressive reforms but showed the limits of third-party status. Broadbent was explicit in his goal of forming government: “From the outset of my leadership, I set out to make the NDP the governing party of Canada. That pursuit was not corrupting. I viewed it as a moral imperative.” Under Broadbent, the NDP sought to leave ‘the conscience of parliament’ behind.

In the 1984 election, the NDP had developed an electoral strategy centered around ‘the ordinary Canadian’ and the ‘Bobbsey Twins’ of Bay Street, where Broadbent successfully painted Brian Mulroney and John Turner as interchangeable representatives of corporate Canada. The poor showing of the Liberals in the election resulted in a caucus that was only slightly larger than that of the NDP.

By 1987, the party’s prospects appeared bright; NDP was leading in several national polls and even reached 25 percent in Quebec. Broadbent went into the 1988 election with the personal hunch of displacing the Liberals and forming the Official Opposition, which would put the NDP “in a strong position to realign Canada’s party system so that it reflected the left-right split common in European countries such as the United Kingdom and West Germany.” But the NDP never achieved its desired breakthrough, in spite of receiving its then-best result of 20 percent of the vote and 43 seats. As is well known, the Canada-U.S. Free Trade

Agreement was the main issue of the 1988 campaign, and the anti-free trade vote coalesced behind the Liberals who campaigned more aggressively against the deal.

Broadbent's biggest disappointment was the inability to win any seats in Quebec, and it was for that reason that he stepped down as leader in 1989. Broadbent, unsurprisingly, rejects the claim from critics that the NDP downplayed the issue, noting that the party had strategic and tactical concerns about a central focus on free trade (as polling that suggested that the Liberals would be the primary beneficiary). Indeed, the 1988 campaign came under heavy criticism from traditional supporters who argued that the party had veered too far from its principles in the pursuit of power and allowed polling to dominate electoral strategy. It was the most centralized, modern campaign up to that time; a discussion about the impact of polling and centralized campaigning could have been fruitful.

Broadbent was also actively engaged internationally, more so than any other NDP leader. One chapter focuses on his work with Socialist International where he served as vice-president of the organization between 1979 and 1989. While there, Broadbent developed a close relationship with its president, West German SPD leader and former chancellor Willy Brandt. Broadbent found the discussions "deeply engaging...I learned how various social democratic models worked and about the policy debates found within the different national parties." Following his leadership, Broadbent served as the first president of the Canadian government organization Rights and Democracy, which promoted human rights and international development (an organization, after Broadbent's departure, that was dismantled by the slavishly pro-Israel Harper government).

Broadbent has remained closely involved with the NDP. He was a strong supporter of Jack Layton, who he supported for the leadership in 2003 over long-time caucus member and personal friend Bill Blaikie; Broadbent briefly returned to politics during the 2004-2006 parliament. Broadbent describes Layton's federal leadership as "instinctively progressive...His instincts were always the right ones." The historic 2011 election result – which saw the NDP displace the Liberals as Official Opposition and a breakthrough in Quebec - led many in the party to trust Layton as he oversaw a project of bureaucratic modernization and ideological moderation.

Though it goes unmentioned in the book, Broadbent opposed the effort by party modernizers around Layton in 2009, who tried to capitalize on the popularity of Barack Obama and rename the NDP the Democratic Party. Interestingly Broadbent, who was involved with the coalition negotiations of 2008-09, now believes the attempt to form a coalition was mistaken, noting there was too much "groupthink" between Layton, Brian Topp and himself, while understanding Stephane Dion's lack of legitimacy in the Liberal Party as well as Harper's ability to attack the legitimacy of the coalition.

Broadbent supported Layton strategist Brian Topp for the leadership in 2012, and was an early skeptic of Thomas Mulcair; like many in the party he was concerned that "Mulcair was quite conservative in his economic outlook." To his credit, Broadbent publicly questioned

Mulcair's social democratic credentials during the leadership race. For Broadbent, Mulcair's centre-right positioning on balanced budgets and taxation, was "not just a serious mistake, but a dangerous one for the NDP's identity as a social democratic party." Certainly, Mulcair took the party further rightward, but it should be noted that a shift to Third Way social democracy was evident in the 2011 election platform.

Broadbent is pleased with the leadership with Jagmeet Singh who is committed to "traditional social democratic principles. He speaks with passion and conviction about inequality, the serious need for action on the environment, and issues of racial justice." Under Singh, there has been a shift away from the Layton-Mulcair Third Way toward 'soft left' positioning. However, the confidence and supply agreement with Justin Trudeau's Liberals (which occurred after these interviews took place) essentially represented a reaffirmation of the Liberal platform and it remains to be seen whether it delivers gains for the NDP.

The 1990s saw the emergence of Third Way social democracy, and Broadbent is highly critical of European social democratic leaders such as Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroder who pursued the "neoliberal project" and "led governments that introduced privatization and expanded the role of markets in areas that had been previously carved out of the market in the struggle for social rights." Broadbent points to the federal NDP as an example of a social democratic party that did not embrace the Third Way (there is no mention of provincial governments; since the 1990s NDP governments have accepted the neoliberal parameters).

Broadbent differs from Marxist and left skeptics (including his late spouse, the Marxist political theorist Ellen Meiksins Wood) who maintain that global capitalism effectively limits social democracy's ability to pursue equality: "We haven't reached the limits of what social democracy can achieve in any society...the adoption of neoliberalism by social democratic parties is by no means inevitable." But the prospects for egalitarian social democracy appear bleak a generation after the Third Way was officially declared; as historian Donald Sassoon put it in his recent book, *Morbid Symptoms*, "[t]raditional social democracy...has been comprehensively defeated almost everywhere...Most social democratic parties sooner or later embraced a policy of austerity, allowed wages to stagnate and inequalities to increase, and privatised services to an extent unimaginable thirty years ago."

In addition to the interviews and essays, *Seeking Social Democracy* contains extensive appendices of archival material, including lectures, speeches in the House of Commons, and the Broadbent Principles for Canadian Democracy adopted by the Broadbent Institute. For students of social democracy and Canadian politics, the book is an insightful and essential read.