

## Weekend With the NDP

by Anna Davey - Monday, March 26, 2012

<http://politicsrespun.org/2012/03/weekend-with-the-ndp/>

### Friday:

Mornings are sub-optimal for me. Mornings that begin at 5:30 are even less functional. Nevertheless, I found myself waking up at a time I think is more sensibly reserved for going to bed. After dressing, re-packing (after developing a sudden mania to fit everything I would need into only my purse and camera bag) and having a brief (extended) cry about not wanting to leave the baby for two days, I was out the door. I was resolute. *There was journalism to be had.*

My trip from home to the Metro Toronto Convention Centre was a caffeinated one. Many of the notes I took during the journey comment on both the quantity and quality of the coffee I was drinking, including an especially poignant and profane comment about the lack of cup holders on the GO bus.

Registration was a smooth affair, complicated only by me not seeing the media registration desk (twice) and trying to register at the wrong place (twice). I cannot fault the NDP for this, as the media registration desk was far from hidden. I did mention I don't function well in the mornings.

One of the NDP staff was kind enough to show me to what the convention organizers called "the blogosphere". In reality, this consisted of a round riser with some tables and power bars, and a crescent of monitors hanging above it to display tweets about the convention. Despite my frequent references to it as "the bloggers' ghetto", it really was a nice enough setup. The power bars were ample, the tables were sturdy and it was probably a wise idea to segregate the bloggers from the Monied Media, as we were by far more garrulous with our colleagues.

The NDP took us all seriously, even if some of us were writing for blogs and sites they had never heard of. We had full access to everything happening at the convention, including access to the leadership hopefuls. Where the CBC could go, so could Politics Re-Spun. Of course, I didn't have quite the pull as Evan Solomon did, nor did I have sufficient height to attract attention in a scrum. Still, it was a heady experience to be taken seriously as a member of the media.

Friday's atmosphere was noisy, enthusiastic and at times, borderline desperate. Everywhere you turned, there were clumps of supporters exhorting you to pay attention to their candidate. Campaign rooms ringed the upper level of the convention, booths occupying the middle. Sadly (for me, at least) none of the booths offered concessions of any sort. Cotton candy would have been an excellent complement to the carnival atmosphere.

Campaign rooms were very obvious reflections of the campaigns themselves. Singh's and Ashton's rooms were quite bare-bones, although Ashton's room had pastries and dishes of candies. She also had a media rep available to talk to me, while Singh did not. I cannot fault him for that, though, as he had very few people on the ground at all. Cullen's campaign room was informal and energetic, and his media rep

was by far the most accessible, going so far as to give me her cell phone number so I could call or text with any spur of the moment questions. I never actually saw the inside of Dewar's campaign room, having been intercepted at the door and passed off to his media rep, who was in the hallway outside the room. I thought the campaign was striking a weird note when Dewar's rep promised me there would be a hip-hop tribute to Jack Layton in Dewar's showcase. Nash's room was high-energy (I must say, also, that she had the nicest-looking swag – those t-shirts were *fantastic*), but focused. Topp's campaign manager, Raymond Guardia, took the time to speak to me, which seemed to be a reflection of how earnest Topp's campaign really was. Guardia was also the most reflective, offering the greatest amount of insight into how the entire leadership race was proceeding. And, perhaps most tellingly of all, Mulcair's campaign room was slightly inhospitable, and contained no one that could speak to me.

The energy on the floor was huge, and delegates supporting their candidate stood in clumps at every turn. Nash's supporters, in particular, were out in force. I could tell whenever I was within 2 floors of them, simply from the sheer volume of their chanting and cheering. They were also the best mobilized, right down to the flash mob Nash's campaign organized.

The energy during the opening ceremonies was huge. It was like everyone in the crowd was giddy. In all honesty, they probably were. Up until the opening ceremonies only staff and media had been allowed into the hall, with delegates contained in the frenetic upper levels. Nycole Turmel received a fantastic response to her speech. Andrea Horwath, leader of the Ontario NDP, also received a lot of love from the crowd. The feeling on the floor was one of excitement, anticipating and joy.

The showcases were fairly well received on a universal level, although specific response was hit or miss.

Cullen's decision to walk onstage and start talking, free of gimmickry, probably had the most polarized response among delegates. Some loved it, some thought his speech was awful. There seemed to be no middle ground.

Dewar's foray into urban music was an awkward flop. Another flop was the moment he announced he had "shooked" hands with thousands.

Topp's showcase featured a lot of messaging about him being "ready" to take on party leadership, emphasis on ascendancy. His supporters were the first to crowd the stage. Topp wasn't begging for votes. He knew he was a strong candidate, and delivered his message efficiently and confidently.

I wish I could report more on how Ashton's showcase was received, but I spent most of it conducting an interview with Andrea Horwath. The parts of Ashton's speech that I did hear were catchy, well-written and masterfully delivered.

Mulcair's showcase was... special. From the drummers that preceded him every time he entered or left the hall (and the source of many amusing "war drums" jokes on Twitter), to his rushed speech, the impression he gave was less "future national leader" than it was "arrogant" or possibly "baffling".

Nash's showcase was easily the shrewdest. The 18 million introductions (or possibly it was seven) were a bit much, but anything featuring Alexa McDonough is tolerable. Nash entered to Florence + the Machine's *Dog Days Are Over*, which was a sly nod to the University of Guelph's vote mob campaign.

Her speech also ran past her allotted 20 minutes, which found her standing her ground and shouting her closing remarks over her outro music as they tried to play her off the stage. If that wasn't a deliberate move to reinforce her "tenacious fighter" brand, I will eat any hat of your choosing.

Singh really surprised everyone at the convention by starting his showcase with an animated video explaining his family's history in Canada, as well as his own personal history. It was a very likeable move. It touched briefly on his key policy platforms, explained why he was different from other candidates and generally made for a refreshing change of pace. He also had his son play the fiddle onstage, which was endearing. I wish I had more to say about Singh's showcase, but it was utterly forgettable once he started speaking. It was a weak ending to the candidate showcase portion of the convention.

Voting happened, people ate dinner, and it became time for the tribute to Jack Layton. T-shirts were handed out by volunteers to those entering the convention hall, and by the time the delegates were seated it was a sea of white and orange. "I am the Layton legacy" on the front, "Je suis la relève de Jack" on the back. Shawn Atleo gave a typically terrific speech, in which he reminisced about Layton's ability to simply listen. Humorous clips of Layton on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, *The Rick Mercer Report* and *Infoman* were shown. Mike and Sarah Layton remembered their father with poignancy. Clips of Layton discussing his beloved granddaughter, Beatrice, and the sort of world he wanted her to grow up in, were played. Turnel spoke lovingly of Layton. An announcement was made that the NDP headquarters were being renamed the "Jack Layton Building". Olivia Chow came onstage and energized the crowd, promising us all that we were indeed the Layton legacy.

## **Saturday**

**First ballot:** Ashton was the first to drop off the ballot, with only 3737 votes. Singh and Dewar voluntarily withdrew from the race after the first ballot results. Supporters were released with out direction from all camps.

**Second ballot:** Nash was next off the ballot, after voting hours were extended twice to accommodate people having technical trouble voting. She released her supporters without direction, but the fact that she was backing Topp was the most poorly-kept secret of the weekend.

**Third ballot:** Plenty of technical trouble, and the voting times were extended again and again. DDoS attacks were made on the NDP servers, slowing the entire process down. Cullen came in last on the third ballot, leaving the fourth ballot a dogfight between Topp and Mulcair. Sometime between the closing of the second and third ballots I became violently sick of hearing the word "kingmaker".

**Fourth ballot:** Audible groans from the convention floor as voting was pushed back for what seemed like the millionth time. I ultimately left before the fourth ballot results were announced, as 1) it was late and 2) Mulcair's victory was a foregone conclusion by that point.

And that, mes amis, was my weekend with the NDP.