

Jack Layton, the best prime minister we never had

Richard Gilbert

Published on Friday August 26, 2011

<http://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorialopinion/article/1045691--jack-layton-the-best-prime-minister-we-never-had>

I knew Jack for more than half of his life, nearly half of mine. He had helped Michael Goldrick, my predecessor on Toronto city council, and then helped me during my first election in 1976. This was when he conducted his first fundraising auction, displaying one of an extraordinary range of talents.

Jack joined me at city hall in 1982 and we became closer, not the least because we sat next to each other in the council chamber for many years. Our views on most things were the same. He was better at expressing them, and much better at mobilizing support for them. I retired in 1991, the year he lost the mayoral race to June Rowlands, becoming the best mayor Toronto never had.

Jack regained his position on the Metro Toronto council (as it was then) in 1994 and spent almost a decade grappling well with the enormous challenges of the 1998 amalgamation. During these years he was elected to the board of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, becoming national president in 2001, another thing we had in common.

Jack was a powerhouse as FCM president, as he was in every position he occupied. As well as doing more to make homelessness a national concern than anyone had before, Jack inspired enough support across Canada to pull off a surprise victory at the federal NDP's 2003 leadership convention. He rebuilt the party towards this year's crowning achievement, making the NDP sufficiently appealing in his home province of Quebec to make him leader of the Opposition in Parliament, a position that — so sadly for us all — he was hardly to enjoy. He is the best prime minister Canada never had.

An adequate description of Jack requires a paragraph of adjectives. The one that for me captures him the best is inclusive. I have never met anyone who cared so much for the welfare of — in the stark words of the bidding prayer — the poor and the helpless, the cold, the hungry and the oppressed, the sick in body and in mind and them that mourn, the lonely and the unloved, the aged and the little children. Jack embraced everyone but especially those who suffered, for whom he worked indefatigably to provide support and strength. His inclusiveness inspired us and we loved him for it.

Jack was much more than a bleeding heart. He was a skilled and highly effective political mechanic, to use Glen Murray's apt phrase. He was above all a leader, a moral leader, of a kind we will need more and more as difficult times envelop us.

A year or so ago, before we knew that the story was mostly apocryphal, Rosalind and I wondered whether any Canadian leader would have done what the king of Denmark was said to have done in 1942 when occupying Germans ordered all Jews to wear a yellow star. As the story goes, the king wore one the next day for his morning outing around Copenhagen, urging all Danes to do the same and effectively nullifying the order. We agreed that perhaps only Jack would have provided such leadership.

Toronto has had a great loss. Canada has had a bigger loss. Jack's remarkable family members have had the greatest loss of all. May our rich memories of him help us build on what he achieved.

Richard Gilbert served with Jack Layton on Toronto city council and Metro council in the 1980s and early 1990s.