

THE EVOLUTION OF JACK

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By John Honderich Chair of the Board, [The Toronto Star](#), 24 August 2011

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For the 30 years I knew Jack Layton, perhaps his most beguiling trait was his unpredictable yet inexorable evolution.

This is a politician who never stopped evolving, never stopped pushing the boundaries, never rested on his laurels.

Precious few can say that. And, as a result, we were all witness to the metamorphosis of a radical, shoot-from-the-hip renegade councillor into the rarefied status of folkloric political icon.

Ours was not a traditional relationship. Jack as politician and I as journalist/editor interacted over three decades on a panoply of issues and causes.

We each had a role to play and respected that — be that a private chat, an editorial board meeting or public forum. Yet from this unique perch, I witnessed firsthand his dramatic transformation and tumultuous rise over three decades.

Right from our first meeting, it was clear he was one very natural politician. He came from a political background, revelled in politics and felt a compelling mission to accomplish good. By happenstance, I knew friends from his native Hudson, Que., and learned early that his pride in his Quebec heritage was visceral.

He made his mark early as a champion for social causes, AIDS research, social housing and eco-friendly transport. Yet he was brash, often alienating natural allies and making headlines but little else.

So when he was elected a Metro councillor, then-mayor Mel Lastman had a choice to make: bring him onto the executive team or let him loose. "I decided to take a chance and it was one of the

smartest things I did," Lastman later told me. "Jack was determined to make things happen — and he changed my views on the homeless." Jack would never forget that gesture.

At the same time, Jack looked for tangible ways to make Toronto a more livable city. He loved the city. Word on the Street, the annual book fair and celebration of the printed word, became a mutual cause for us both. We never planned to meet but Jack was always a fixture there. "Isn't this just grand," he'd usually say.

Any thoughts Jack might be mellowing vanished, however, with his high-profile alliance with the anti-poverty group Bread Not Circuses to help scuttle Toronto's bid to host the Olympic Games. I thought him dead wrong on that one. Still do. We debated it often. Yet, even at the time, I remember my silent admiration of his unabashed defence of a position he felt so vehemently about. "Principled," he'd say.

That legacy, however, would ultimately undermine him as he sought Toronto's mayoralty in 1991. Trading in his trademark blue jeans for suits and his glasses for contact lenses, he ran a surprisingly strong campaign against veteran June Rowlands. Many were taken with the new Jack, yet more alliance-building would be required.

The Star gave him a very backhand endorsement but warned that he "seems incapable of learning the art of compromise so necessary for a mayor."

For Jack personally, this defeat was particularly stinging. He felt he had changed his ways, built more bridges. But it still wasn't enough. Yet once again, he picked himself up and took the lessons learned to create future victories.

In this case, it took several years but Jack decided to seek his old municipal seat and from then on set his sights on the powerful Federation of Canadian Municipalities. This is the governing body for all Canadian urban centres and is an ideal place to make contact with like-minded civic officials across the land.

His goal was to become its president but, needless to say, coming from Toronto wasn't an advantage. Nevertheless, he succeeded in building alliances everywhere. Riding a need for a new urban agenda, Jack and I became fast allies as the Star was also crusading for a "new deal for cities." We were, as the saying goes, in violent and vocal agreement.

It would be on that same urban agenda that he used as a point of differentiation that Jack would ride to victory as the new national leader of the NDP in 2003. This time, the Star endorsed him over the entrenched favourites as "high risk but the one to go with. He is the leader with a national focus who might — just might — be able to lead the stumbling party back to respectability."

In between all this, Jack also showed up one day in my office with an innovative way to redesign the awkward and angular intersection of Yonge St. with Lake Shore Blvd., just north of the Star building. It never went anywhere, despite its virtue. But here was Jack as city-builder trying out another new

Our final lengthy interaction came just last year when Jack unexpectedly called "to have a chat." Not quite sure what to expect, I was taken aback when he appeared with a well-worn copy of a book I had written on the Arctic. His purpose was to discuss Arctic sovereignty in particular, and the North in general.

He knew his stuff and for almost an hour we engaged fully. Then he left, ever the gentleman, with the quip "it seems you were ahead of your time on this one."

It was only later I learned Jack had developed a practice of reaching out to academics, journalists, policy geeks and ex-politicos to glean insight on any issue. He would cold call and then show up — anxious to learn and debate. Still wanting to learn, it seems.

Thus when Jack showed up last April for what would be his last ceremonial editorial board meeting seeking the Star's federal election endorsement, he was, to put it mildly, a vastly different character than the firebrand from the '80s.

Reasoned, incisive, confident yet not brash, totally conversant on issues, in charge of the room, on the verge of a historic breakthrough in Quebec. Most of the faces in that room, seasoned journalists all, had interviewed, seen or watched him many times before. But for the very first time, the words "prime ministerial" emerged.

Ultimately, Jack would garner that endorsement and go on to make history by becoming the first NDP leader of the official Opposition.

The man who never stopped growing. The man who a country came to know as simply Jack.

Quite an extraordinary story, indeed.

A Photo Tribute to a great Canadian: Jack Layton:

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