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Sep. 12, 2005. 01:00 AM

Layton gears up for election fight

Eager to take Martin to task over gas prices, CBC lockout

NDP MPs gather in Toronto for three-day strategy session

[ANDREW MILLS](#)
OTTAWA BUREAU

Jack Layton is sitting on the patio of Bodega restaurant on Baldwin St. in Toronto, spreading foie gras on toast and, it seems, trying out portions of his stump speech.

"When I hear (Prime Minister) Paul Martin say — and he's already testing this line — 'We need a majority.' I'm saying, 'No, you don't, you haven't earned it. You don't deserve it,'" Layton says across the table.

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Then the federal NDP leader really cranks it up, his delivery just a bit too energetic for an audience of one at Sunday brunch.

"Your party has been in power for a very long time. Poverty went up. Homelessness went up. Pollution went up. Corruption went up. And so this claim that somehow what you need is more power doesn't pass the test, Mr. Martin," Layton says. "Canadians need to be in power and what we're suggesting is that the more New Democrats you have, the more in power Canadians are going to be."

And there you have it — a key message the NDP will likely be trying to get across in the six months or so between now and the next federal election.

Most of the party's 19 MPs arrived in Toronto yesterday for a three-day retreat designed to, as Layton puts it, "set the sails" for the months ahead. The idea is to solidify strategies for both the parliamentary session that opens Sept. 26 and the election campaign that lies ahead, probably in January and February.

It promises to be a crucial period for a party that sits at 19 per cent in the polls, just behind the Tories, who have the support of 25 per cent of Canadians, according to findings from SES Research early last month.

The standings in the 308-seat House of Commons are Liberals, 133, Tories, 98, Bloc Québécois, 54 and NDP, 19. There are also three independents and one vacant seat.

When Parliament opens, Layton says, the party plans to start off pressing the government on three urgent issues: high gasoline prices, the softwood lumber dispute with the United States and the month-long CBC lockout of 5,500 employees.

Layton sees Martin's inability to act with any urgency on issues like those as a failure of leadership.

"I think that Paul Martin, despite his protestations, he doesn't have a vision for the country ...," Layton says. "Failed leadership, it's the problem. They spend far too much time thinking about re-election ... and not enough time setting the course."

The NDP's own planning for the next election is already underway, with more than half of the candidates officially nominated, and many of the others just waiting to become official. Those who will be running in the GTA are set to meet the federal caucus this week.

Come election time, Layton says he expects to make a big push to pick up seats in four key regions: Northern Ontario ("It feels abandoned."), Saskatchewan, British Columbia and Ontario cities like Windsor, London,

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And in every one of the stump speeches Layton delivers, expect him to mention the \$4.6 billion boost in federal spending he convinced Martin to agree to in exchange for NDP support in the series of confidence votes last spring.

"I think people reacted well to what we did on the budget ... people would say to me I haven't necessarily voted NDP or supported NDP, but I like what you did," he says. "We have to stay on that path. If we suddenly reverse to the old political games that the others have been doing, then people will say, `they're just like the others.'"

It was that additional federal spending Mayor David Miller, a fellow New Democrat, lauded at a reception he held for the caucus at city hall later yesterday.

Miller explained that it means stable capital funding for the TTC, allowing new buses and more flexible passes. He also pointed out that \$1.6 billion in additional federal housing spending will do a lot for the 60,000 Toronto families waiting for affordable housing.

"The day that Jack Layton negotiated the agreement with Paul Martin — what I call the cities budget — was an incredible day for Toronto," Miller said. "It was a day that every single member of the caucus should be incredibly proud of."

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