

Annotated Notes: NDP Leaders Meeting - February 18, 1981

The following is an edited version of the notes taken by the author at the New Democratic Party (NDP) Leaders' meeting on Wednesday, February 18, 1981 in Calgary, Alberta. The original hand written notes are available in the archives at the University of Alberta.

In these notes, the author has taken the liberty of inserting context and comments in brackets after the notes for explanation and clarity. These are based on his memory from the time. Non-trivial insertions and notes to the original minutes are also added.

This Leaders' meeting came about as a result of differences between the federal NDP and some of its provincial sections in Western Canada. In particular, the NDP in Saskatchewan, which was in government at the time, had a number of differences on the direction of constitutional changes which had been undertaken by the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau, and supported in the House of Commons by the federal NDP. This meeting was a last ditch attempt by the NDP leadership of the various sections of the party at finding some common ground on the whole matter constitutional change.

The leaders and representatives of the federal NDP, Manitoba NDP, Saskatchewan NDP, and the Alberta NDP, attended the meeting. The British Columbia NDP declined to attend.

In attendance:

- Howard Pawley, Leader of the Official Opposition in Manitoba;

- Wilson Parasiuk, Member of the Official Opposition and former cabinet minister in Manitoba;
- Allan Blakeney, Premier of Saskatchewan, Leader of NDP;
- Grant Notley, Leader of the Alberta NDP;
- Raymond Martin, NDP MLA in Alberta;
- Roy Romanow, Deputy Premier and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs in Saskatchewan;
- Howard Leeson, Deputy Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs in Saskatchewan;
- Edward Broadbent, Member of Parliament and Leader of the federal NDP; and,
- Norman Simon, executive assistant to Edward Broadbent.

The Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta sections of the NDP arranged the meeting at a Calgary airport hotel. They also met and discussed a common position prior to meeting with the federal representatives. It was decided that Grant Notley would take the lead in presenting a number of proposals to the federal leader and his representative at the meeting. These proposals were considered by the provincial representatives to be a compromise between supporting the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau, and the governments of six provinces, British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Québec, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, who were opposing the federal initiative both legally and politically.

The meeting opened shortly after 10 a.m. The room was a small conference room, which kept things rather intimate. Ed Broadbent and Norman Simon were late for the meeting. It is fair to say that most of the participants were not looking forward to the meeting. The atmosphere was tense, and most of the participants were less than optimistic. Allan Blakeney had scheduled a news conference for the following day and although he had not publicly or privately disclosed the contents of that conference, it was obvious to most people that he was going to announce his opposition to the constitutional resolution being debated in the House of Commons. It looked as if he would be joined by a number of NDP members of Parliament from Saskatchewan. This was deeply troubling to Ed Broadbent who had worked hard to try and prevent a split in his federal caucus. On the other side, Allan Blakeney was perplexed by the seeming intransigence of the federal leader. He had expected that Ed Broadbent would play a much larger role in mediation.

It was agreed by the participants that Grant Notley, the leader of the NDP in Alberta, would present the views of the provincial participants at the meeting.

Grant Notley opened the meeting. He outlined the items that the provincial leaders had discussed at their earlier meeting. The original notes for this meeting are available in the University of Alberta archives.

Ed Broadbent said he wanted to discuss a statement on the matter of constitutional change that the Premier of Saskatchewan, Allan Blakeney, was to make the next day in Regina. The provincial representatives indicated that they would be willing to discuss that later in the meeting, but wanted to discuss an actual compromise first. This, they said, could influence what Allan Blakeney would say the next day.

Grant Notley then proceeded to outline the various items. Primary among them was the need to seek approval for another First Minister's conference to try and find common ground among the provinces, most particularly with Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and Nova Scotia.

Howard Pawley then elaborated on matters, and indicated that he was worried about a resolution on constitutional change that would be forthcoming in the Manitoba house. In particular, he and his party might be forced into a choice between supporting the provincial Conservative government, and the federal New Democratic Party.

He indicated that a brisk, short resolution would cause difficulty.

Howard Pawley

– At this point, before the resolution (in the federal House of Commons) is passed the approach should include some further input from the provinces. (I) do not agree with court action, or lobbying in London but a federal-provincial conference is an item of concern. Negotiation versus (confrontation).”

Ed Broadbent

– What are you asking me? Would it be useful?

Grant Notley

– Yes, would it be useful?

Broadbent

– No. And there is not a hope in the world of getting one.

Allan Blakeney

– There are lots of problems with process, both for the party and the country. Some may disagree. We in the NDP are in a unique position in the middle, in a situation in the middle. There is confusion in the country.

– Pressures are building on all sides – there is no presumption of success in the minds of the four Premiers, Lougheed, Bennett Peckford, and Lyon.

– Our thoughts, my thought, is that if we could get a broad base of support in the provinces it would be good for the country as well as good for the party (NDP).

Broadbent

Do you think that Trudeau would call a meeting?

Blakeney

Yes – he could get Bennett, Buchanan, and myself. The present process will leave a lot of scars, for every political party and nationally. We ought to attempt to get a middle road if possible. While a good number of people are attracted to the contents, not many are attracted to the process. When we turn our mind to how we might get a larger number on board it is well worth it.

Norman Simon

– At what time you see this meeting being held?

Blakeney

– Sometime before now and the end of the debate in Parliament – I do not know if the parliamentary debate will have a pause. I think that there would have to be a conference if Bennett or Buchanan could be brought onside.

Simon

– What do you see being on the agenda?

Blakeney

– Well, it would be essentially the resolution before the house. Any additions or subtractions would have to be agreed and there would have to be an agreement that there would be no new subjects that weren't raised by the resolution.

Simon

– Wouldn't pressure caused by honest broker be as good?

Blakeney

– Maybe – but who is the honest broker? But a lot of groundwork will need to be done in advance. I believe that there should be a con-

sensus of provinces in support of the resolution before it goes forward.

Broadbent

– It would be total lack of credibility for us to propose. It would be considered laughable by Liberals, the media, and the country. Only a handful of premiers at best would support it. Trudeau would dismiss it out of hand.

Blakeney

– What would Trudeau say about why he would oppose it?

Broadbent

– He would say we have a number of provinces supporting the resolution. He would also say that if provincial parties want a meeting they could propose it.

Blakeney

– If the position of the federal NDP is that the Constitution should be amended with the objection of eight provinces there will not be any cooperative federalism.

Broadbent

– I agree in principle but – I think action is needed now – on the matter of the entry of Newfoundland into Confederation there was a split.

Blakeney

– But there was a majority.

Broadbent

– Well, I personally would like to take it to a national vote – Trudeau would also. He would sweep the country if he did.

Blakeney

– Do you really think that he would sweep the country?

Broadbent

– If Trudeau went to the country I would not want to oppose him. Anyway, it would be laughable for me to propose a First Minis-

ters' Conference. It might be taken seriously if somebody else proposed it.

Blakeney

– But would you not take it seriously?

Broadbent

– We would be laughed at.

Simon

– What is the advantage to the federal leader doing it?

Blakeney

– Frankly, the federal NDP has the clout to do it now.

Broadbent

– But we have already approved it (the resolution).

Ray Martin

– But it could be changed.

Broadbent

(Leeson observation: Broadbent indicated that it would be inappropriate for the federal NDP to propose changes now.)

Blakeney

– But there have been many changes since October.

Broadbent

– Trudeau showed me all of the changes. I went through the list – he said if you push for them you get them – it is part of our private deal.

Blakeney

– And it had nothing to do with public credibility of proposed changes?

Broadbent

– Right – but it was accepted. Our position is now public. Maybe some low-key thing, but even that would be seen as an attempt to back out – Trudeau might even like that. He may have an election.

Notley

– But there is more pressure on from the Premiers now.

Broadbent

– Yes, but Trudeau has the most credibility.

– And there are really no British problems.

Leeson

– Do you think he would go before the Supreme Court also?

Broadbent

– Yes.

Blakeney

– Would you support that?

Broadbent

– Yes.

Blakeney

– You would support that.

Broadbent

– Would if I had my druthers.

Notley

– Has caucus decided on that?

Broadbent

– No.

Leeson

– Ed, [returning to the question of the first ministers' conference] you do not think Trudeau would support this – there is more problem with approach than substance. What is the hurry – why not sit down one more [time]? Surely with all that has passed – a lot of hostility – surely the Prime Minister would look taller if he said we do not want to have another wound. Why would he look foolish?

Broadbent

– I will tell you why – because you already say they (the opposing provinces) are looking for deletions from the resolution.

Notley

– Except to get consensus with it – with the Premiers, would give it support.

Simon

– It is unnecessary. It has lots of support. We stand to lose also if it is changed or defeated.

Notley

– But the process is dividing the country.

Martin

– The process will be divisive for a long time.

Broadbent

– How long?

Martin

– There are more and more separatists There is some feeling in Saskatchewan also.

(Leeson explanation: He referred to the Western separatist parties.)

Notley

– What if there was some possibility to get others on board?

Broadbent

(Leeson observation: Ed Broadbent did not seem to take this seriously.)

Roy Romanow

– The purpose of this meeting is to heal NDP – to hell with Trudeau and Clark. Is it credible for us? I think Trudeau’s resolve is winding down. Our own internal policy might be blessed. In the absence of that, it is going to degenerate into a donnybrook. What other common ground is there?

(Leeson observation: This response seemed to provoke Ed Broadbent. He believed that he had the support of the provincial sections, but that now they were backing out.)

Broadbent

– But I had the commitment of all provincial leaders [of the NDP]. We will fight for it, you said. In that context, [we had] a united front in the party. If the task is to forget Trudeau and heal the party all it takes is to have Al say “you negotiated in good faith but can’t support it.” The rest of us support it as we said. In the next four weeks – Tories may be smart – then it will go to Westminster and pass – It is a good package, good for Canada. There are no problems in the long run – One year from now changes will be posted around etc. I am talking about the political difficulties in the short run.

Martin

– We have some real difficulties.

Notley

– Problem for the country – no government in Western Canada [can support it] – very divisive. If there was another conference to split that up [it would help].

Broadbent

– If there was credible evidence that there would be agreement then it might make some sense.

Notley

– [If you got] five or six out of 10 you could cast aside unanimity.

(Leeson observation: At this point Ed Broadbent shifted the argument to the assumption that there were no other provinces willing to agree to a package.)

Broadbent

– Well, if someone said here come provinces XY and Z that would agree on PQ and R in private conversations . . . you might have something. But I do not see it.

Notley

– If you . . .

(Leeson observation: Norm Simon interjected.)

Simon

– *What is the negotiation on?*

Blakeney

– *Yes, around formula and Senate.*

Notley

– *What about that – amending formula and Senate?*

Broadbent

– *Another formula?*

Simon

– *But if it fails?*

(Leeson observation: At this point Ed Broadbent made his feelings very clear. He believed that the Prime Minister had made every reasonable effort to accommodate the government of Saskatchewan during the negotiations in January.)

Broadbent

[directed to Allan Blakeney] *But surely he (Trudeau) has gone the extra mile with you.*

(Leeson observation: This is an especially telling comment. Next, there was a general discussion on the Senate and options in which Allan Blakeney again made his point that changes around the Senate were important.)

Broadbent

– *I do not take the Senate argument seriously.*

(Leeson observation: This was spoken in a slightly derisory fashion. Then there was a further general discussion on the legal and constitutional position of the Senate.)

Broadbent

– *But Liberals and Tories marked it out. But no one really cares.*

(Leeson observation: Although the exact quote is unclear, Ed Broadbent was making the point that only the Liberals and Tories really cared about this.)

Blakeney

– *But Senate said no.*

(Leeson observation: Blakeney was making the point about the formal powers of the Senate.)

Broadbent

– *Who would fight against the Senate? Provinces?*

(Leeson observation: Broadbent attempted to point out that some of the provinces were not fighting against the Senate, but rather for its legitimation.)

Romanow

– *There are two ways to reform the Federation. They are through the division of powers – and through institutions.*

Broadbent

(Leeson observation: Exact reply not recorded, however the discussion became much more general. At this point Grant Notley attempted to get the conversation back to a manageable agenda.)

Notley

– *Suppose we come back to a more narrow focus – amending and Senate. Any opening?*

Broadbent

– *I would turn it around again. First Ministers conference raises PQ and R and who will support it.*

Simon

– [to Allan Blakeney] *Will not a failed conference hurt you?*

Blakeney

– *Yes.*

Broadbent

– *Will they come?*

Blakeney

– *Yes.*

Broadbent

– *You give me the evidence that Premiers will do something and I will do it.*

Romanow

– *Look, our best position is to go against the resolution. It is the easy way for politics and substance. I grant that we could suffer a loss of face –and it would be tough for everybody.*

William Parasiuk

– *A point I would like to raise.*

Broadbent

– *You should have raised it earlier.*

Parasiuk

– *I was not there – Parliament is responding to interest groups not provinces.*

Broadbent

– *What about resources?*

Parasiuk

– *We are being finessed. I want to have a balanced Federation. They should have gathered more support from the provinces. There seems to be lots of leeway to interest groups – but not provinces. If we're going to have a Bill of Rights – we said it should be limited. I appreciate your position on Bill of Rights – but there seems to be no response to provincial concerns.*

Broadbent

– *You're right there has not been a redistribution of power.*

Parasiuk

– *Why not scrap the referendum or why not have one now?*

Broadbent

– *Are you . . .*
– *The only way we can do this is if you can come up with a list of provinces prepared to meet.*

Notley

– *But would you meet?*

(Leeson explanation: At this point Broadbent again turned to the argument that the package was politically popular.)

Broadbent

– *Where are we losing? Where are we down? We are up.*

Martin

– *We're not arguing the Charter. I argue the case against the process.*

(Leeson observation: At this point Broadbent became quite agitated.)

Broadbent

– *You are dreaming in Technicolor. You are painting it in the worst light.*

Simon

[not recorded]

(Leeson observation: At this point the discussion became quite argumentative, especially between Martin and Broadbent. Howard Pawley tried to bring the discussion back to some order.)

Pawley

– *We have little disagreement with the substance. We disagree sharply on process. I thought the gang of six would call for a federal provincial conference.*

– *Process is tainting the outcome. We should not let this pull the party apart. Surely the course to follow is for you to reaffirm your support for the substance – could we not come out ahead of the game to come up with a constructive middle of the road approach?*

Broadbent

(Leeson observation: His reply was not recorded, but it was not positive.)

Notley

– *I gather that you will consider it (another first ministers' conference) on a narrowly defined basis.*

Romanow

– *We do not want a limited agenda.*

Broadbent

– *It is not credible then.*

Notley

(**Leeson observation:** Again at this point Grant Notley tried to find some agreement. He returned to his plea for a conference on the narrowly defined basis.)

Broadbent

– *Well okay.*

Notley

– *I will leave it with you.*
– *What about the matter of closure being invoked on the debate?*

Blakeney

– *We need distance between us and Trudeau on process.*

Broadbent

– *But we will oppose closure. This sparked a further debate on the whole issue.*

Romanow

– *I say again that we need some distance between us and Trudeau.*

Broadbent

– *We will vote against closure – but if Tories filibuster – then I will vote for closure.*

Notley

– *We are collectively worried about closure.*
(**Leeson observation:** At this point Ed Broadbent responded to the question about the inclusion of property rights in the Constitution.)

Broadbent

– *Property rights? It will not come back. We have a veto.*

Notley

– *What about a court decision? We're nervous. You disagree?*

(**Leeson observation:** At this point Ed Broadbent returned to what would be contained in Allan Blakeney's statement the next day.)

Broadbent

– *Allan's statement is a real concern for me. I want to minimize the differences between us and for the other provincial sections. My concern overall is still what is the real purpose of the First Ministers conference. Is it to stop the process? To mobilize everyone – might have that effect. But then what happens to the resolution and what is in it? What will you say in your legislature?*

Blakeney

– *At this point our resolution will be short and sweet. We oppose process and substance.*

Broadbent

– *What about the Alberta and Manitoba parties?*

Notley

– *The other resolution was easy. I think he [Lougheed] will try to get a hard-line resolution. We might have to support it.*

Simon

– *Do you want to resolution to fail? Do you want to have Westminster kill it?*

Blakeney

– *I think that we would want resolution not to go. I think that I want them to work this out in Canada.*

(**Leeson observation:** At this point Ed Broadbent tried to point out that Saskatchewan would have come on board had the negotiations with the federal government succeeded in January.)

Broadbent

– *But you would have said okay if your negotiations had succeeded in January.*

Blakeney

– *Either you believe that Parliament can change it or Westminster has some discretion.*

Broadbent

– *But you would have supported it if you had agreed.*

Blakeney

– *But they did not succeed and now everyone is off on their own.*

Broadbent

– *But I thought that we were trying to get a deal?*

– *Why can't you just say you are opposed?*

(Leeson observation: At this point Romanow tried to divert the discussion back to what would happen in Parliament.)

Romanow

– *How do we deal with the Tory motion?*

Broadbent

– *My concern is with the necessity of the first three points.*

– *Britain?*

Blakeney

– *Why would we not oppose it in Britain?*

Broadbent

– *But if you are not . . .*

(Leeson observation: Discussion regarding Manitoba situation and charter.)

Notley

– *Let's conclude our discussion on a conference if possible.*

Romanow

– *I think that we should not try to go around and drum it up. If it is not a real conference we should not have a staged one.*

Parasiuk

– *Why do you have to put in the British connection?*

Broadbent

– *I say again why don't you call for a conference.*

Romanow

– *Because you have the clout.*

Notley

– *I think it offers us a way to come together.*

Romanow

– *But shouldn't we try?*

Blakeney

– *I agree*

Broadbent

– *I cannot say that we will call for it.*

Blakeney

(Leeson observation: Unknown interjection)

Broadbent

– *Are you strongly opposed?*

(Leeson observation: The minutes end at this point. As we know however, the discussion came to no fruitful resolution.)

