

# The price of refusing to listen: Sask. Party's bruising session

BY MURRAY MANDRYK, THE LEADER-POST    MAY 21, 2010

Dwain Lingenfelter's New Democrats clearly won the battle this legislative session, but it's a victory that begs the following serious question over the future of the NDP:

At what price did this victory come?

So vicious were Lingenfelter and his caucus this session that some might have been inclined to feel a bit sorry for Premier Brad Wall and his Sask. Party colleagues.

Such sympathies would generally be misguided. For as vicious and nasty as the NDP were, most of Wall's problems were ones that he and his government brought upon themselves.

Consider the commonality of the massive-by-any-legislature-protest standard crowd that assembled in front of the legislature Tuesday to protest a myriad of Sask. Party government laws, policies and spending decisions. The easy thing for the government was to write off the vast majority of those protesters as angry unionists with a distinct political agenda to re-elect an NDP government. While that might be the case for someone like Saskatchewan Federation of Labour President Larry Hubich, who was master of ceremonies for part of the event, this wasn't the motivating factor for even most of the union protesters there.

They showed up in droves out of sheer frustration -- not so much even with government policy, but more so out of the frustration of dealing with a government not inclined to change or amend one iota of government policy.

Even minor amendments to Bill 80 probably would have at least somewhat placated Terry Parker and the provincial building trades council he represents. Instead, the government sold us a phony spin job that the construction labour bill changes were being made to benefit workers as opposed to mostly out-of-province construction company owners.

It was the kind of government arrogance that got the last NDP government into trouble, but what was likely worse for the Sask. Party is that it isn't just confined to politically charged labour debates. The unwillingness of Environment Minister Nancy Heppner to take into account the concerns over amendments to the Wildlife Habitat Protection Act was particularly mind-boggling, given that many of those concerned about the changes were hunters, fishermen, farmers and outdoorsmen who would traditionally be considered Sask. Party supporters.

That Heppner -- supposedly one of the rising stars in the Wall cabinet -- somehow managed to mess this file up so badly that it made the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (another group on the

lawn of the legislature Tuesday) angry over treaty land entitlement speaks to the problems you get into when hear only what you want to hear.

In fact, that was exactly why the government got into so much trouble in its March budget, which cut funding for chiropractor visits, SCN, Dutch Elm disease control and mosquito spraying. This is a government that gave a lot of fodder to an Opposition that was simply much better.

Under Lingenfelter's leadership, the NDP was much more focused and carried out its daily agenda to demonstrate the government's fiscal mismanagement, its inability to deliver quality health care and to attack Brad Wall in a more personal, nasty way.

But it's on the latter point where Lingenfelter and the NDP caucus probably went too far and might have even possibly done some harm to the New Democrat brand in the long term.

To be frank, Wall and his Sask. Party caucus contributed far more to the vile atmosphere than they claim. That said, the NDP simply went overboard on personalizing issues. Whether it was Wall's condo in Phoenix, Serge LeClerc's situation, Wall's past business dealings or past involvement in government, no shot seemed too cheap for NDP MLAs. Especially bad were Darcy Furber (who barked at the government like a junkyard dog at every opportunity) and Sandra Morin (who came over as a cross between a yappy poodle and a pit bull, exhibiting the less endearing qualities of both).

But all took their lead from Lingenfelter, who somehow didn't recognize that dragging Wall down meant sliding deeper into the mud as well. Because of that, Lingenfelter did little to close the gap between the two parties.

He might have won this spring's battle, but he also might have done some long-term damage to himself and his party.

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