

Helping the middle-class a top priority for NDP, says Mulcair



By Nate Smelle

Although the issues debated in the House of Commons can sometimes seem far removed from day-to-day life in cottage country, the decisions made at the federal level often bring about the biggest changes in society. With the 2015 federal election right around the corner the four main candidates vying to be Canada's next Prime Minister have already started to make their voices heard from the campaign trail.

On Thursday, Feb. 12 *Bancroft This Week* had the chance to sit down with the leader of the New Democratic Party (NDP) Tom Mulcair to discuss his party's plan to create sustainable economic growth, reduce inequality and improve the quality of life for all Canadians.

During his time in office Mulcair said he has witnessed several injustices within Canada that he considers utterly unacceptable. His responses to these harsh realities have defined his political career and helped earn him the leadership of his party and the official opposition. Nicknamed 'Grizzly' and 'Pitbull' for his tenacious style of debate Mulcair took over the federal leadership of the NDP following the death Jack Layton in 2011. Ever since he has made removing injustice and inequality from Canadian society a main priority of the party.

'I know that 800,000 Canadian kids go to school every morning hungry, that's an injustice,' Mulcair said.

'I don't accept that as inevitable. I don't accept that First Nations reserves are so poor they are like Third World conditions. In a society as rich as Canada this should not happen. I don't accept that senior citizens should be living in complete poverty when they are the ones that built this great country. These are all things that we do not need to have in our society because we are rich enough

to take care of each other. We just need a government that is going to make these things a priority.?

Mulcair described the NDP's plan as a clear approach to helping the middle-class achieve a better quality of life through promoting family values and fairness. Stephen Harper's plan does the exact opposite, he said, because it aims to solve the problem of income inequality by taking from the middle-class and giving it to the richest 15 per cent of Canadians.

?Nothing matters more to us than being able to stay in contact with our loved ones and knowing they are in good hands,? said Mulcair.

?New Democrats are committed to ensuring fair access to essential services and infrastructure, like the local post office and quality health care, and that all Canadians, wherever they live, can work and retire in dignity.

According to Mulcair, if he is elected as Prime Minister he will also help middle-class families cope with poverty and inequality by raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour. Furthermore, the NDP plans to ease the financial strains imposed on families by making child care affordable at \$15 a day.

?This puts money directly in the pockets of middle-class people and families who need it,? he said.

?It also puts money in the hands of people who will spend it which is good for the economy.?

Helping to put food on people's tables and promoting food security is one of Mulcair and the NDP's main objectives. Visiting small towns and big cities across the country, he has noticed communities embracing sustainable agricultural practices in a wide variety of innovative ways. He believes that initiatives that encourage people to grow organic food and/or buy local build stronger communities and economies. He also sees them as representative of a larger shift that is taking place in this country.

?This is a movement across Canada where people are becoming conscious of issues that they didn't think too much about before,? Mulcair said.

?Issues like how far food travels to get to their table, and what kind of conditions it is grown, raised are processed in. I think these are the type of things that will inspire people to homestead in rural areas that haven't seen new families come in for a long time.?

Not only do such sustainable methods make the food system healthier for people and the environment, they also have the potential to stimulate the local economy on different levels.

?We have to work with the farming communities to measure their phosphates, what's going into the system and what's leaching into the ground,? he said.

?You need to have everybody on side to get that. It can be done right in these places being credible countrysides and places to live for generations to come, but if you allow those types of pressures, that type of 10 to one development during the vacation season that's a massive strain and stress on those ecosystems.?

More specifically he said that communities like Bancroft, whose economy relies heavily on a seasonal influx of cottagers and tourists, need to be especially careful in the type and amount of economic growth they invite in. It is also very important for these types of destinations in cottage country to respect the environment and its beauty as the most valuable resource fuelling the local economy.

?Sustainable development is making sure that in our society every time we make a decision we look at the effect on the environment, on the economy and on society,? said Mulcair.

?That's the responsible way to develop in a region like Bancroft for example, or in downtown Toronto. These are the basic rules that

we need to apply. When I was the minister in Quebec actually went so far as to change the Quebec charter of rights to include as a charter eight the right to live in a clean environment.?

Mulcair is aware of the challenges that have arisen for rural Canada in recent decades. The NDP's plan to overcome this self-perpetuating cycle of poverty many rural Canadians find themselves in depends upon the next generation's willingness to get involved in their communities.

?Too many young people leave to seek opportunities in metropolitan areas while the income gap is deepening compared to urban centres,? Mulcair noted. ?Years of neglect and inertia by the federal government have left our rural communities struggling to develop and maintain essential services and infrastructure.

Canada's continued success as a country is fundamentally dependent upon the success and health of rural communities.

?Together, we can ensure communities like Bancroft can seize the economic opportunities they need to grow and prosper,? he stated.

?New Democrats have a plan to invest in strong and sustainable communities, leveraging federal infrastructure investment and targeted small business supports to make our communities prosper. Our vision of a diversified economy includes sustainable growth in the agricultural, tourism and natural resource sectors that play such a large role in our rural and northern economies. We need to ensure that new generations can stay and prosper, and help new entrants with the financing and operating costs they need to get their businesses started up.?

Pointing out that the number of farms in Canada has declined by 26.5 per cent between the years 2001 to 2011?which translates into a loss of more than 74,000 farms?he said Canada needs a government that believes in sustainable agriculture. Mulcair said as the governing party the NDP would support small farmers and encourage young people to stay and help the industry thrive once again.