

Principles, passion and knit-wits

ALEXA McDONOUGH REFLECTS ON 50 YEARS OF FIGHTING TO MAKE HALIFAX A BETTER PLACE

BY MARJORIE SIMMINS

Alexa McDonough won't agree just to be agreeable. Instead she considers a question, then responds with candour. Nothing has changed since stepping down as the federal leader of the New Democratic Party a decade ago. "Reinvented myself? Well, no. I've been such a fierce partisan all my life," she says. "I was born in Ottawa. That's where my parents served as members of the CCF [Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, precursor of the NDP]. Politics is in my DNA."

Which makes a daily dose of the House of Commons debates a must for Halifax-raised McDonough, who now lives in a new apartment on the site of her childhood home in the South End. "I just love watching Question Period," she laughs. "Some people might say 'Get a life, Alexa,' but I enjoy the debates. Mulcair is different than *bon Jack* [the late Jack Layton, McDonough's federal successor], but he's articulate and doing such a good job. One hundred seats for the NDP right now, and Mulcair is holding them together as a team. I feel optimistic about the federal scene."

But after the recent provincial election, which saw the majority NDP government soundly defeated and left with only seven MLAs, things are gloomier on the Nova Scotian NDP scene.

"Oh dear, it was sad," she says. "The NDP had such fabulous candidates running this time round: youthful talent such as Abad Khan, Drew Moore and Tanis Crosby, and long-time talents such as Leonard Preyra, who is so effective and caring." She pauses. "But you know, the tide comes in and goes out. One has to be optimistic. These

individuals may not be in the legislature this time, but they'll keep on serving in their communities. Values and passions don't evaporate, and these people won't disappear. You take a longer view, you have to."

Having spent most of her working life as a politician, McDonough knows about the long view. Parents Lloyd (a prominent businessman) and Jean Shaw raised her and brother Robbie, a retired executive, in a politically active home. They taught the kids about social responsibility early on. "We weren't allowed to go to the Waegwoltic Club because it had a racial and anti-Semitic barrier, although most of our friends in the neighbourhood [did]. We learned early how you bring about change, because, my father and some other neighbours said, 'Well, this isn't right. Why are we staying away instead of joining?' And they did, and knocked down the barriers. My father's life was all about getting rid of prejudice and discrimination."

By the time McDonough was 14, she had led a youth group in publicizing conditions in Africville, the later-razed black community on Bedford Basin. It set the tone for the next 50 years. First as a social worker, then as a politician and always as an activist, she has been passionate about human rights and social justice.

"It was my ballet teacher that prepared me to do crazy things," she says. "People were saying, 'Why were you that headstrong? I was kind of clumsy and everyone thought I should take ballet, because my mother's sister was a professional ballerina. My ballet teacher taught me to take flying leaps and don't worry too much about where you land as long as you land on your feet.'"

Good advice for anyone, especially a young woman determined to have an adventurous, meaningful life, despite being told by her beloved father, Lloyd, that it was, "too bad she wasn't a boy, because she'd make a great businessman." She smiles. "He was a progressive guy, but he wasn't exactly a product of the feminist era."

Megan Leslie, McDonough's successor as MP for Halifax, has had the veteran's support throughout her political career but the two women are completely different. "Alexa is an extrovert, I am an introvert," Leslie explains. "She is energized by people. I have to recharge my energies on my own."

Leslie recalls an early exchange with McDonough. "I had a minor

sexist encounter on the Hill when I first got there as MP,” says Leslie. “I told Alexa about it and she was dismissive. ‘Get over it,’ she told me. She was saying, partly, figure it out on your own, and partly, that’s the political world she always knew. So get used to it.”

McDonough was elected to lead the provincial NDP in 1980. She represented the Halifax Chebucto and Halifax Fairview ridings from 1981 to 1994, and then was federal NDP leader from 1997 to 2003. Leslie says, “I couldn’t have done what Alexa did,” Leslie says. “I well up with tears when I think about [the isolation].” Sexism was rampant and tolerated, says Leslie, and McDonough was Nova Scotia’s only female MLA for years.

Leslie says it wasn’t until McDonough served as interim-president at Mount Saint Vincent University in 2009-10, a now-co-educational institution that has been educating women since 1873, that she understood what Leslie had meant about a work-positive environment.

It was a two-way street. The university’s new Margaret Norrie McCain Centre for Teaching, Learning and Research, opening in 2015, will house, among other institutes named for distinguished women, the Alexa McDonough Institute for Women, Gender and Social Justice.

“Alexa is a remarkable and unassuming woman,” says President Ramona Lumpkin. “Whenever she introduces me, she always says, ‘Here’s the real president, I just warmed her seat for a year.’” Nonsense, says Lumpkin. “Alexa is a woman to be reckoned with. She is tough.”

She can also be impatient. Lumpkin relates a story about McDonough chairing a senate meeting at the university one evening. One speaker rambled on, trying everyone’s patience. “Stop ragging the puck,” growled McDonough, putting the meeting back on track.

Another time, says Lumpkin, McDonough put Progressive Conservative MP Peter MacKay in his place, after he’d sneered at her in the House of Commons to, ‘Go back to your knitting!’ “Later on, during a debate, Alexa marched across the House and dumped balls of wool on him. She stands up for her principles.”

McDonough’s fiery temper is no secret.

“I admire Alexa tremendously,” says Brian Flemming, a lifetime Liberal and former policy advisor to Prime Minister Trudeau, and currently counsel to Halifax law firm, McInnis Cooper. “She is a ground-breaker of magnificent proportions for women in politics in Canada. But sure, she has a temper. All politicians do.” Over the years, he and McDonough have disagreed on some policies, says Flemming. “But we have a great friendship now.”

McDonough and ex-husband, lawyer Peter McDonough have two sons, Justin and Travis, four granddaughters and three grandsons. The grandchildren are involved in ballroom dancing, Irish dancing, ballet and hockey. “Nanny” goes to as many of the lessons, competitions and games as she can, enjoying every moment with the youngsters.

In 2013, McDonough fought breast cancer. She underwent a mastectomy and treatments. She has a clean bill of health now. She is happy and grateful. “I have a spectacular life,” she says. “Every single day. I am so blessed: with my family and friends, in where I live, the travels I’ve done lately.”



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Life in Halifax, McDonough says, “is like having a daily menu to choose from—pick up a newspaper, there’s theatre, dance, music, art, restaurants of different ethnicities—whatever you want.”

When she looks at the downtown, her views aren’t what you might expect. “So we have this cavernous hole [downtown] now,” she says. “Half my friends went berserk ... My son is chair of the board of the World Trade Centre that was answering [the question], ‘Why are you trying to destroy our city?’ And I probably sound like a terrible Pollyanna, but to me that’s the stuff of politics. That’s the lifeblood of a dynamic city—the heritage people mixing it up with the developer, and both of them mixing it up with the old, the young, the new—don’t anybody take that away. I mean, we could live in a totalitarian state where people have no say in those things and then there would be nobody arguing about anything. Instead, we have synergy, energy and community.”