





# DARRELL DEXTER

BY: ELEANOR BEATON

# THE INCREMENTALIST

**Moments after I sit** down to interview Darrell Dexter, I learn there has been a change in plans.

It seems to be happening to him a lot lately. Consider the headlines of recent political columns which have blasted Dexter for his seeming openness to cutting services and raising taxes, the two things he swore he wouldn't do in the landmark June election that saw him crowned the first NDP premier east of Ontario: *Dear Darrell, the honeymoon is over*, laments Dan Leger, director of news content for the *Chronicle Herald*. Or, as veteran journalist Stephen Kimber writes: *They were lying. We knew they were lying even while they were still telling them. We voted for them anyway.*

My headline would go something like this: *Och, Darrell, I hardly knew ye.* I had arranged to get an hour of face time with Dexter in order to write a considered, in-depth profile of the man. Soon after sitting down, Jennifer Stewart, his press secretary, sternly informs me I have 20 minutes. On the scale of changes of heart, this is low-priority and Dexter deals with it in much the way he seems to deal with everything: briskly. He sits down, runs a hand through his famously grizzled hair and starts answering questions. It is late in the day, and Dexter is pale, tired-looking and verging on hoarseness. But he conducts himself with the discipline of the former military man he is, marshalling information, delivering it clearly, managing expectations, staying on message. Five months into the job he's long coveted, and Darrell Dexter is already an old pro in what experts like to call "change management."

NDP leader Dexter laughs during his first media conference as Premier-Designate at his party caucus office in Halifax. (Paul Darrow/Reuters)



## Portrait of a Premier

**Parents:** Elvin (father, a sheet metal worker) and Florence (mother, grocery store clerk).

**Birthplace:** Born and raised in Milton, Queens County, Nova Scotia.

**Siblings:** Six children, including Darrell.

**Wife/Children:** Married to Kelly Wilson. One son, Harris (19).

**Schools Attended:** Bachelor of Education, Bachelor of Laws, Dalhousie University; Bachelor of Journalism, University of King's College.

**Career:** Served in the Canadian Navy as a command information officer for Maritime Forces Pacific and as sub-lieutenant on HMCS Yukon and HMCS Qu'Appelle; former chair of the Dartmouth Downtown Development Corporation; elected Dartmouth City councillor in 1994.

**Hobbies:** Basketball, golf, reading and travelling.

**Darrell's Master Plan:** My goal is to make life better for Nova Scotia families. Already my government has implemented a number of measures to do just that. For example, we introduced a new home construction rebate to stimulate the economy and keep our skilled tradespeople here at home.... We've also stimulated the economy and created thousands of jobs by maximizing federal infrastructure dollars. (We) will fast-track funding increases for transition houses across Nova Scotia, the first time in more than a decade these groups will see a bump in funding. In October, we removed the provincial portion of the HST on basic home electricity, saving millions of dollars in energy costs for Nova Scotians. We hired Dr. John Ross to advise the province on ways to improve emergency health care, and we established ministerial accountability for emergency departments.... Our government is on track to meet our other commitments to improve life for families, including establishing a community land trust, drafting a five-year paving plan and establishing a suburban priorities team.

## THE PREPARATION

As far as politicians go, Dexter is neither particularly suave nor especially silver-tongued. In fact, his lack of pretence prompts Deputy Premier Frank Corbett, one of Dexter's closest political confidants, to call him the "anti-politician." But what he lacks in overt charm, he makes up for with what former federal NDP leader Alexa McDonough calls his "deadly earnestness". He is so earnest, in fact, that asking his friends and confidants to come up with a surprising or little-known anecdote about the man is futile. What people remember about him is generally related to his tirelessness and deeply-felt sense of responsibility, whether it be handling recounts at the end of a long by-election, or campaigning until late in the evening to get a friend elected.

And yet, there is something in the bustle of his bearing that connotes a complicated energy. He is a passionate sports fan, especially of basketball. On the court, McDonough says, he's competitive to the point of being scrappy. He is a quintessential middle-of-the-road kind of guy, whose normalcy is at the heart of his great appeal.

Born in the small town of Milton, Queen's County, Darrell moved to Halifax in grade two when his father, a sheet metal worker, landed a job at the Halifax shipyard. For most of his childhood, he spent the school year in Halifax and his summers at his grandparents' home in Milton. He was popular and demonstrated early some of his legendary energy, playing sports and working a part-time job as a paper carrier. When his was in grade nine, his family moved back to Milton where he attended Liverpool High School and, by his own admission, scraped by doing as little work as possible. A few years ago, one of his closest high school friends told a CBC-TV reporter he remembered Dexter saying in high school he'd one day be the "NDP premier of Nova Scotia." Dexter has said he doesn't remember it. He did, however, state in his yearbook that his life's dream was to become a millionaire.

Dexter's experience growing up both in the city and in a small working class town seems to have informed his political view. For years, Dexter campaigned on basic, no-nonsense issues that deeply affected the lives and pocketbooks of average Nova Scotians, such as public

auto insurance, better care for seniors, and affordable electricity.

It doesn't hurt that he conveys a sense of straight-talk – even about his personal life. Shortly before the spring election, he revealed to the Halifax newspaper *The Coast*, the existence of a half-brother living in England. His brother, Dennis Mackie, was the product of a brief affair between Dexter's father and a British woman when he served overseas during World War II. In a campaign marked by certain instances of nastiness (most notably the release of topless photos of an NDP candidate leaked by a Liberal campaign worker), Dexter seemed to sense that honesty was the best defense.

But even the broadest appeal in the world might be hard-pressed were it not for true political savvy. Just as Obama understood and leveraged the power of social media to amass political power, Dexter's spring campaign was a social media leader; for example, surfers who Googled Tory leader Rodney MacDonald or Grit Stephen McNeil during the election were automatically routed to the NDP homepage. And just as Obama's historic win galvanized a nation – if not the world, for a brief moment in time – Dexter's victory injected Nova Scotia's fetid political scene with a breath of fresh air. "Who would believe that NDP orange would cover Nova Scotia?" Dexter mused in his victory speech, his normally devout expression erased, at last, by an elated grin. Bored, exhausted and disenchanted by politics as usual, scores of Nova Scotians who had never considered voting NDP decided to give the rumpled, diligent, hard-working lawyer from Cole Harbour a chance. It was hard not to feel happy for him. He had spent 10 years sweating on the Opposition benches, eight of them as party leader, for this day.

"We have never had a premier come into the office who was as prepared for the job as Darrell is." Alexa McDonough, former leader of the federal NDP and current acting president of Mount Saint Vincent University, first met Dexter when he worked on her 1979 federal election campaign. She was immediately struck by his eagerness to learn. "He is a perpetual researcher... he's a student of history, of politics, a student of life." In Dexter's case, "student of life" can be construed as a euphemism for a young adulthood spent pursuing a number of different career avenues. When he first entered university, he was a reluctant

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## You Asked, Dexter Answers

The following questions were submitted by residents of Nova Scotia. For more constituent Q&As with the Premier, see our online extras at [ABMonline.ca](http://ABMonline.ca)

**T.C. from Cape Breton:** What do you believe should be the provincial government's reaction to global warming, and how should the provinces treat further efforts to control CO<sub>2</sub> (or rather, should they even be concerned)?

**Premier Dexter:** My government views the issue of global warming and climate change as a serious concern. That's why Nova Scotia is working hard to be a leader in green initiatives. We were the first province in Canada to place hard caps on greenhouse gas emissions in the electricity sector, and in July, we set a new target for renewable electricity production — 25 per cent by 2015. Right now we are developing world-class renewable energy technology that can help us meet these targets. We have been recognized for our leadership in LED lighting and tidal energy, including the in-stream tidal turbine recently installed in the Bay of Fundy — the largest of its kind in operation in North America, and one of the largest in the world. Nova Scotia also recently announced \$4.25-million in funding for green transportation and technology projects, to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions, air pollutants and energy costs. Over the next four years we will continue to expand our renewable energy sector and develop a skilled workforce to accommodate our growing green economy

**D.D. from Halifax:** How will the Hydro Quebec Deal with NB Power impact Nova Scotia? Should we be making a deal with Newfoundland and Labrador to ensure our part/share of revenues for exported power into the U.S.?

**Premier Dexter:** New Brunswick is in a strategic position for transmission links between the Atlantic provinces and the rest of North America. Right now, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador are seeking assurances that the best interests of Nova Scotia, and the Atlantic region, are protected. Atlantic Canadians are best served when our provincial governments work together to gain the best possible opportunities for the region as a whole, as well as the separate interests of each province. It is important that New Brunswick Premier Shawn Graham recognizes that a written agreement on a new interprovincial transmission line is best for all our provinces.

**V.B. from Halifax:** Given that Nova Scotia has one of the lowest averages of private investment of any of the Canadian provinces, has your government given any thought to what it can do to attract international and national investment dollars for Nova Scotian companies?

**Premier Dexter:** Our government is always looking for ways to encourage people to invest in Nova Scotia. Recently, I led the Atlantic Gateway trade mission to Vietnam to promote investment in our region's transportation and education sectors. I also attended the climate change conference in Copenhagen in December, where Nova Scotia green businesses had the chance to showcase their operations on an international stage. Our government boosted the equity tax credit to 35 per cent from 30 per cent, which was expected to generate more than \$1-million in new incentives to support investments in local enterprises. We also introduced a manufacturing and processing investment tax credit to boost jobs and increase innovation and productivity in Nova Scotia's manufacturing and processing industries.

student, scraping through his first year at the University of Kings College with four credits. That summer, he landed a union job at a Teleglobe telecommunications facility and figured he'd trade university for high-paying work. But a late-summer conversation with a supervisor who had worked the same ditch-digging job for two decades prompted Dexter to change his mind. He headed back to school, where he became involved in student politics. It was here that he met his future chief of staff, Dan O'Connor, who was also the chief strategist in Dexter's victorious spring campaign. Dexter cobbled together a BA in Education, but jobs were scarce for teachers at the time, so he re-enrolled at King's, this time in the new one-year Bachelor of Journalism course. Following his training in journalism, Dexter went to work for the navy, as an information officer. He got some experience, met his wife, Kelly Wilson, and persuaded her to move with him to Nova Scotia, where he was about to embark on yet another degree — this time a Bachelor of Laws.

In recent interviews, Dexter has argued that his initial meanderings were in fact formative and enlightening. Working different jobs and gaining various degrees showed him the value of feeding his curiosity, and gave him a breadth of knowledge he draws from to this day. "He inspires confidence because he has a deep knowledge and life experience," reflects McDonough. And though he may have fooled around in school, friends say Dexter has the memory of an elephant, and plenty of curiosity to boot. Robert Chisholm, the former leader of the Nova Scotia New Democratic Party, met Dexter in 1991 during his successful by-election in Halifax-Atlantic. Like McDonough, Chisholm found Dexter's energy and curiosity to be formidable. But what made him invaluable was his grasp of the issues. "He had more political knowledge in his little finger than I ever had," says Chisholm.

Over the years, Dexter's political experience has refined and sharpened his early instincts. As a Dartmouth lawyer, he served on various boards and as president of the Dartmouth Merchants' Association. He became a Dartmouth city councillor in 1994, and was elected MLA for Dartmouth-Cole Harbour in 1998. He assumed leadership of the party in 2001. The grueling schedule of political life, and its unending demand for comment, context and opinion suited Dexter. He threw himself into his career as a politician, embracing the long hours, mastering "the issues" and tirelessly



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**By Spring 2009,  
the NDP had formed  
a majority government  
with 31 seats.  
The party's rise  
to power reflects the  
trajectory of its leader.**

Deputy Premier  
Frank Corbett

spreading his message of good government and a better deal for families.

He didn't make waves. Rather, his political progress proceeded like a gathering tide, building momentum slowly and steadily. Dexter inched his way up the political ladder, as did his party. In 1999 the NDP had just 11 seats in the legislature. Two years after Dexter took over the party, they added another four. In 2006 it won 20 seats, and by Spring 2009, the NDP had formed a majority government with 31 seats. The party's rise to power reflects the trajectory of its leader, says Corbett. "Darrell is an incrementalist. He moves forward one step at a time."

#### **DO IT LIKE DOER**

When Gary Doer stepped down as Premier of Manitoba this October to take over as Canada's Ambassador to the United States, he left, as Winnipeg Free Press political columnist Dan Lett observes, "with his boots on." After 10 years as Premier, Doer left with his reputation as leader of the most successful NDP administration in Canada

intact. Like Dexter, Doer spent years in Opposition and took over as leader during a period of ebbing NDP support in Manitoba. By steering clear of the more left-wing elements of his party and toeing a decidedly centrist line, he slowly built up support for the NDP, until the party formed the provincial government in 1999. Under his leadership, the NDP reached out to businesses, Lett says, engaging influential business leaders in various economic working groups and advisory panels. He oversaw cuts to income taxes, corporate taxes and small business taxes. "He did things most people would have expected of a conservative government," Lett remarks. In so doing, Lett says Doer was able to tighten his grip on power, by effectively demoralizing his political opponents, and placating businesses enough to not only avoid a "holy war", but to earn their grudging respect. What's more, because of his lengthy experience in opposition, by the time he became premier, Doer was surrounded by an experienced and dedicated political team who had spent years preparing for the job. "They were a group of political sharp pins who really spoke to the quality of his government," Lett observes.

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“There’s lots to learn from Gary Doer,” says Dexter, who counts the former Manitoba premier as a close friend. A handful of Doer’s political aides, and at least one policy analyst, now work in Dexter’s office. So far, this Premier has walked a pragmatic, centrist path. By not appointing several high-profile, left-leaning members of his caucus to cabinet, notably Halifax MLAs Howard Epstein and Leonard Preyra, Dexter seems to have deflected fears of an overtly socialist agenda. The importance of such a move can’t be understated, argues Lett. “Whenever the NDP comes into power, there are elements of the population, especially the business community, just waiting to go nuts.” However, Dexter’s reputation as a “conservative progressive” was forged long before he came into power.

### DO IT LIKE HAMM, OR MCKENNA

It is said that in politics, you ought to keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Years before becoming Premier, Dexter began what would ultimately become one of his most formative working partnerships

with former conservative Nova Scotia Premier John Hamm. Beginning in 2003, when the Conservative party was reduced to a minority, Hamm and Dexter worked together in what has been described as a “coalition-style” government, where Dexter held the balance of power. Hamm’s reputation for prudence and good governance, (he committed to using the \$830-million in revenues realized from the Atlantic Accord directly on the provincial debt) made him a popular and respected leader and appealed immensely to Dexter. Over the years, the two worked together, making deals, delivering votes and inching their agendas forward. “It was akin to a sort of mentorship,” says McDonough. “He learned a lot about how to govern from that relationship.” During these years, McDonough says the NDP made huge strides in Nova Scotia. “He built up power the NDP caucus had never had.”

It is perhaps demonstrative of this respect that Dexter, with his hustling, no-rest-for-the-weary demeanour, is beginning to draw comparisons with another revered leader - former New Brunswick Premier Frank McKenna. “People tell me they want me to be like Frank McKenna,” Dexter said to a

**Whenever the NDP comes into power, there are elements of the population, especially the business community, just waiting to go nuts.**

Winnipeg Free Press Columnist  
Dan Lett

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**Halifax has always been a gateway to this country and I want to reignite that sense that Nova Scotia is a nation-building province.**

Premier  
Darrell Dexter

gathering of Toronto investors this fall. "But there is only one Frank McKenna. But what I can do is strive to bring that same kind of attention and drive to the need to develop the economy of this region." Later, Dexter expounds this view. "This is about commerce. It's about making sure that we recognize that a market economy drives our ability to do the things we want to do."

As the region's first NDP premier, Dexter is not without a sense of occasion; he feels called to solidify Nova Scotia's importance within the region. "Halifax has always been a gateway to this country and I want to reignite that sense that Nova Scotia is a nation-building province. We have a leadership role to play in this entire region."

Dexter says the first step is to take a "regional view" of economic development, by marketing the Atlantic region as a connected market with 2.3-million people, rather than four distinct provinces. Of course, the news of the impending sale of New Brunswick Power to Hydro Quebec has undermined that vision. Dexter takes a typically pragmatic view: "No matter who the system operator is in New Brunswick, we're going to have to do business with them." His concerns about the sale

however, reflect his pan-regional view; that a non-Atlantic system operator in New Brunswick may have interests that diverge from those of Atlantic Canada. "That would be concerning," he says. He's not yet saying what he'd actually do if that indeed proves to be the case.

Dexter's views on economic development display a new level of statesmanship that is surprising from a leader who, a few short years ago, campaigned on public auto insurance and help for seniors. In fact, since taking power, Dexter has focused a significant amount of time on reaching out to business. Over the summer, he worked closely with Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters to introduce a manufacturing and processing investment rebate. He also introduced a higher equity tax credit rate. He has scheduled business missions to Ontario where he has met with leaders of firms such as Research In Motion, who have invested heavily in Nova Scotia in recent years. After conducting a personal audit of major CN assets in Nova Scotia, he arranged a meeting with president Claude Mongeau in an attempt to address logistics challenges at the Port of Halifax. While Dexter gushes about the attitudes of business leaders to the province

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**Iceberg Silver Rum does.**

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("They have some of their most productive operations here"), he is characteristically earnest about the real impact of his advances. "A lot of businesses simply want to look me in the eye and say, 'I can make an assessment of this person.'" Dexter brushes off the notion that, in reaching out to business, he is selling out the social democratic aspect of his party, a criticism that was frequently leveled at Doer. "A lot of what has existed out there about the NDP and business is mythology that I have never agreed with or bought into."

Even more surprising was Dexter's response to the recent unveiling of a report from a panel of economic experts, which included Dalhousie economist Lars Osberg and APEC leader Elizabeth Beale, advocating raising taxes and cutting services in order to extricate the province from the fiscal hole of an ageing population, shrinking tax base and a heavy debt load. While no promises have been made, Dexter is considering raising income taxes and the HST to cover the projected \$1.3-billion (largely) structural deficit. The news has prompted mixed reviews. "He clearly understands that we're up against the wall with our fiscal situ-

ation in Nova Scotia," says Valerie Payn, president of the Halifax Chamber of Commerce. "You have to admire his boldness early in his mandate, and the fact that, despite what people say about the NDP, he's willing to be fiscally prudent."

But others point out that raising taxes in Nova Scotia, just as New Brunswick is considering lowering its overall tax burden, could spell disaster for businesses. Nowhere is this as obvious as in Nova Scotia's northern towns that closely border New Brunswick.

Amherst convenience store owner Michael LeBlanc put his life savings into purchasing his business 18 months ago. When the provincial government recently announced a tax hike on cigarettes (a cash cow for many convenience stores), LeBlanc estimates he lost 20 per cent of his business to New Brunswick competitors located a mere five minute drive away. In response, he put a large sign on the front of his property that read "Thanks NS Govt for Higher Taxes from NB Retailers." A proposed two-per cent hike in the HST could destroy his business, he says.

"Dexter needs to realize that he can't solve

**He clearly understands that we're up against the wall with our fiscal situation in Nova Scotia.**

Halifax  
Chamber of Commerce President  
Valerie Payn

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our problems overnight. The things he's looking at doing will have major consequences."

The concerns of people like Michael LeBlanc, which have been echoed by others in the business community such as Canadian Federation of Independent Business president Leanne Hachey, could be among the stiffest opposition Dexter has faced in his career. After all, it's simple, hard-working people like LeBlanc that put Dexter in power in the first place.

But political watchers say Dexter is working hard behind the scenes to maintain close ties with the other provinces. "I think he wants to be seen as a pro-business regional leader," says allnovascotia.com political reporter Brian Flinn. "Dexter's is clearly a team that has ideas they want to talk about and explain what they're going to do before they do it."

If Nova Scotia is staring down the barrel of deep cuts and hefty tax hikes, then there may be some solace in Dexter's incrementalism. He'll probably break his province into this new reality gently – one percentage point, and one program cut, at a time. 🍷

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