

Canada's social democrats to move further to the right

Keith Jones
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The New Democratic Party is in the midst of a policy review aimed at shifting Canada's traditional social-democratic party still further to the right. Although the review process will culminate only next August, when the federal NDP holds its national convention, party leader Alexa McDonough and her top aides have made it clear that the NDP is being remade in the image of Tony Blair's New Labour Party.

Blair's New Labour has become the toast of newspaper editorialists and political spin doctors across Europe and North America for combining hollow rhetoric about a caring society, with an intensification of the assault on social programs and public services and unfaltering support for British big business in its struggle for markets. According to Blair, there is a 'third way' between the Welfare State and Thatcherite 'laissez-faire,' in which state social policy is more closely tailored to the needs of big business and the reformist notion that society has an obligation to its poorest and weakest members is jettisoned in favor of the Victorian idea that those who receive state aid are taking on a 'debt to society' that they are duty-bound, if not legally compelled, to repay.

'We are into a new phase,' McDonough told the *National Post*, a 'major rethinking and repositioning.' She said her trips to Britain and other European Union countries where social-democratic parties hold power have convinced her that the NDP should embrace the nonstandard collective agreement, part-time work and other arrangements designed to make labor more subservient to the needs of capital. 'We can be both fiscally responsible and economically creative and at the same time ... socially responsible,' said McDonough.

In her *Post* interview, McDonough stressed that the NDP is 'pro-business' and agrees with Bay Street that

paying down the federal government debt and slashing taxes should be priorities.

To underscore her resolve to shift the NDP further to the right, McDonough named veteran MP Nelson Riis as the party's first-ever parliamentary critic for business last August. 'The NDP has not always acknowledged the importance of the role of the private sector to the extent that is appropriate and necessary,' McDonough told the press conference announcing Riis's appointment.

The policy review is also considering whether to maintain the NDP's organizational ties to the trade unions. Some NDP leaders are said to favor ending union affiliation and changing the party's name to the Democrats so as to emphasize their political affinity with the US Democratic Party, which, unlike the NDP, has never been shy about courting the support of the most powerful sections of big business.

Founded in 1961, the NDP has traditionally been the third largest party in Canada's federal parliament. But in the 1993 election it was all but wiped out, winning just 7 percent of the national popular vote and failing to win even the 12 seats needed for official party status in the House of Commons. The collapse in NDP support was centered in Ontario, where an NDP provincial government was in the process of imposing massive cuts in social spending, public sector wage and job cuts, and tax hikes.

In the 1997 federal election, the NDP regained official party status, by appealing to popular discontent over the Liberals' cuts in social spending, particularly Unemployment Insurance. But at 11 percent, its share of the popular vote was still a far cry from the 20 percent it received in 1988 and for the second election in a row the NDP failed to win a single seat in Ontario or Quebec, Canada's two most populous and

industrialized provinces.

McDonough has since admitted that the NDP's 1997 campaign against the Liberals' spending cuts was an electoral strategy aimed at regaining official party status, and was never meant to be taken as an indication of what the NDP would do were it to form the government.

Buzz Hargrove, president of the Canadian Auto Workers, has denounced the NDP's policy review, claiming, 'Canada does not need another business party.' Hargrove told the *National Post* that McDonough's drive to remodel the NDP along the lines of New Labour 'will cause a lot of people to reevaluate their commitment to the party.' He even suggested the labor movement might have to form 'a new leftist political force.'

Hargrove's statements are hardly credible since he and his union recently voted to support the return to power of the big business Liberal Party in the next Ontario elections. What they do indicate is that sections of the union bureaucracy fear that the NDP has moved so far to the right that it will be unable to play the role of a political safety valve for capitalism under conditions of a radicalization of the working class.

At a more fundamental level, the crisis of the NDP is an expression of the shipwreck of social-democratic reformism and its perspective of using the nation-state as a means to mitigate class conflict and 'humanize' capitalism.

See Also:

Canadian Auto Workers union to stump for Liberals in coming Ontario election

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