

Tories oust Liberals in Nova Scotia election

Another debacle for Canada's social democrats

Our correspondent
29 July 1999

After six years in opposition, the Tories have been returned to power in Nova Scotia, the largest of Canada's four Atlantic provinces.

In Tuesday's provincial election, the Tories won 29 of the 52 seats and 39.2 percent of the popular vote. The Liberals, who had been reduced to a minority government in the March 1998 election, fell to third place in terms of both seats and popular vote, meaning the New Democratic Party (NDP) will form the official Opposition.

There was no jubilation among social democrats, however. Just sixteen months ago the NDP, a perennial also-ran in Nova Scotia politics, captured 19 seats and fell less than a percentage point short of leading the province in the popular vote. On Tuesday, the NDP won only 12 seats and saw its share of the popular vote shrink by almost 5 percent, to 29.9 percent.

The Tory election campaign combined an appeal to popular resentment over the declining state of public health care and education with right-wing demagoguery. Tory leader and Premier-elect John Hamm claimed an NDP government would be beholden to the unions and sought to exploit regional divisions, blaming hospital closures in Halifax on government support for a failing steel mill in Cape Breton.

Even the press has exuded skepticism over the Tories' ability to implement their 243 election promises, noting that their pledges to raise social spending, slash taxes and balance the provincial budget are contradictory. The new Tory government will quickly jettison those promises that don't accord with the interests of big business, while insisting it has a popular mandate for closing the Crown-owned Sysco steel mill and for slashing public services so as to satisfy Nova Scotia's creditors and finance tax cuts for the well-to-do.

The Nova Scotia elections are of national significance

for three reasons.

First, they underscore that in the 1990s political allegiances have largely broken down. With all the traditional parties having moved sharply to the right and adopted similar pro-business programs, public interest and engagement in official politics is declining. Support shifts quickly from one political formation to another as the electorate pragmatically searches for a party responsive to its social concerns, or one that at least appears to represent change.

The Tory victory in Nova Scotia is the second time in two months that the Tories have entered an election campaign trailing badly in the polls only to emerge victorious on polling day. Led by a new, 33-year-old leader, the Tories recently won 44 of New Brunswick's 55 seats, ousting that province's 12 year-old Liberal government.

Secondly, the defeat of the Liberals in Nova Scotia is a major blow to the six year-old federal Liberal government. In Canada, the defeat of a national government is traditionally preceded by the defeat of provincial governments of the same political stripe.

When the Tories were ousted from national office in 1993, there were only two sitting Tory provincial governments. Following Tuesday's election only one of Canada's ten provinces, Newfoundland, has a Liberal government. In 1993, there were five. While among working people the Liberals are increasingly identified with social spending cuts, large sections of the corporate elite and upper middle class, envious of their US counterparts' swelling fortunes, have become apoplectic over the Liberals' failure to aggressively slash taxes and launch a new round of privatization and deregulation.

Finally, the Nova Scotia elections are of significance because they represent a further stunning blow to the

trade union-based NDP. At the beginning of the decade, under the impact of Canada's worst economic slump since the Great Depression, the NDP came to power in three provinces—Ontario, British Columbia and Saskatchewan—representing more than half of Canada's population. Since then, support for the NDP has plummeted, as the social democrats have come into open conflict with the working class. NDP governments have imposed sweeping social spending cuts and onerous tax increases, attacked trade union rights, and victimized welfare recipients.

The NDP was swept from office in Ontario in June 1995. Then, in a further election last month, it failed to win enough seats to maintain official party status in the provincial legislature, although Canada's most populous province has been convulsed by massive struggles against cuts to public and social services. Saskatchewan's NDP government recently postponed elections until the fall, after using emergency legislation and the courts to break a nurses' strike. Earlier this month, the British Columbia NDP government was rocked by several cabinet resignations triggered by disputes in the party's top brass over how to respond to big business's demand that the NDP move still further right. For his part, NDP Premier Glen Clark has made a former leader of the provincial Liberal Party effectively the number two man in his government, naming him to a series of important posts, including the Finance Ministry.

The NDP leadership looked to the elections in Nova Scotia, the home province of federal party leader Alexa McDonough, as a means of reversing the tide of party woes—not only by capturing office, but by using Nova Scotia to showcase a new breed of “pro-business” social democrats. McDonough and her entourage intend to use next month's national NDP conference to press for the jettisoning of what remains of the NDP's traditional reformist program and its remodeling along the lines of the New Labour Party of Britain's Tony Blair. A victory in Nova Scotia, or so McDonough and her advisors hoped, would serve to quiet rank-and-file discontent over the NDP's new rightward turn.

The NDP made spectacular electoral gains in Nova Scotia in both the 1997 federal election and the 1998 provincial elections by appealing to popular opposition to the federal Liberals' cuts to Unemployment Insurance and the cuts which both levels of government

have made to health care and education. But with the NDP apparently poised to take power—opinion polls at the beginning of the campaign showed it in first place—the party leadership ordered a change in strategy so as to dispel misgivings in business circles over an NDP victory.

Nova Scotia NDP leader Robert Chisholm began the election campaign by denouncing the provincial Liberals for proposing to borrow \$600 million over the next three years so as to reinvest in public health care. Nova Scotia, he affirmed, could not afford to add to its \$9 billion provincial debt. Attacked by the Tories for being pro-union, Chisholm vowed that an NDP government would not threaten the interests of corporate giants like Michelin Tires. So right wing was the NDP campaign, *The Globe and Mail* dubbed the NDP the party of “fiscal responsibility.”

After Tuesday's electoral debacle, the NDP leadership has scoffed at suggestions the party's right-wing campaign opened the door for the Tories to return to power, thus underscoring its determination to reposition the party as “business friendly.” According to a national party worker, Nova Scotians “weren't ready for an NDP government.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact