

Following prairie election victories, Canada's social democrats to lurch further right

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The leadership of Canada's social democratic party is seizing on the party's modest success in two recent provincial elections to push the party still further right.

No sooner had the New Democratic Party (NDP) been declared the winner of last Tuesday's Manitoba election, unseating a Tory government that had held power for eleven years, than NDP leaders and strategists were touting the results as proof that their bid to recast the NDP as a "fiscally responsible," "business-friendly" party was resonating with voters.

Both Manitoba premier-elect, Gary Doer, and Saskatchewan Premier Roy Romanow, whose NDP government narrowly won re-election September 16, have strongly supported federal NDP leader Alexa McDonough's attempt to "reposition" the trade union-based NDP as the parliamentary voice of "small- and medium-sized business."

After McDonough deemed it politic to drop references to British Labour Prime Minister's Tony Blair's Third Way, the better to secure rank-and-file New Democrats' support for a shift to the right, both Doer and Romanow made a point of declaring themselves Blairites.

The Manitoba NDP, benefiting from a collapse in the Liberal vote, captured just under 45 percent of the vote and 31 of the 57 seats in the Manitoba legislature. While the New Democrats did appeal to popular concern over the deterioration of public services, particularly health care, their campaign was most noteworthy for its conservative tenor.

In contrast to the Tories, who promised to slash taxes by \$500 million while increasing spending on health care and education by a similar amount, the NDP promised modest property tax cuts and social spending increases together totaling \$200 million.

"We are only coming forward with promises we can

keep within the budget that was produced by the government four months ago," said Doer. In fact, as part of its attempt to convince big business that the social democrats can be trusted not to deviate from the past decade of fiscal austerity, the NDP voted for the last Tory budget and has pledged to adhere to the Tories' mandatory balanced budget legislation.

Doer has also echoed the Tories' law-and-order rhetoric, promising to hire more Crown Attorneys and establish a special unit to prosecute gangs. To further emphasize that the NDP is not the reformist party of the past, Doer mimicked Blair, who refers to the British Labour Party as "New Labour," dubbing the Manitoba NDP "Today's NDP," and promising to outlaw trade union, as well as corporate, political donations.

Speaking to reporters on Wednesday following the first meeting of his new parliamentary caucus, Doer was quick to squash suggestions the NDP might introduce major changes to the province's labor code. "We're not going to do anything that would be knee-jerk ... that would send the wrong signal to business." Later he repeated an NDP election commitment to convene a provincial summit of business, union and government leaders.

Saskatchewan Premier Roy Romanow has long been the media's favorite social democrat, because his government, on coming to power in 1991, imposed deep social spending cuts, including the closure of 52 rural hospitals. Even the *Globe and Mail*, long considered the voice of Bay Street, endorsed Romanow's NDP in last week's election.

But to the shock of the media pundits and pollsters, Romanow's government only barely held onto office, winning exactly half of the 58 seats in the provincial legislature. With the Saskatchewan Party, formed two years ago by eight disaffected Liberal and Tory

legislators and backed by Preston Manning's Reform Party, holding 26 seats, the NDP government is now dependent on the support of the three Liberal members of the legislature for its survival.

The NDP's electoral losses were mainly in rural areas, where farmers have been sideswiped by declining grain prices. But NDP officials conceded that even in the party's urban strongholds there was considerable disaffection with the government, particularly over deteriorating public services and the use of strikebreaking legislation, most notably against nurses earlier this year, to quell worker discontent.

Many voted for the NDP only because of their opposition to the Saskatchewan Party's right wing agenda of sweeping tax cuts and social conservatism.

Romanow's response to the near defeat of his government has been to move further to the right. He has said the NDP will probably scrap its pledge to finance the tuition costs of first-year university and college students and has instructed budget officials to re-examine government revenue projections to see if taxes can be reduced more sharply as demanded by the Saskatchewan Party.

In an interview with the *Globe and Mail*, which was held until after the election, no doubt so as not to anger party activists, Romanow said that during his next term he will intervene more actively in the debates in the federal NDP. The time has come, he explained, for the NDP to reconsider its basic philosophy, including its support for Medicare, Canada's free, universal public health care system.

"If the notion is that what we have to do is simply make sure that every form of technology or medical advance is available for everybody [and] publicly financed, it just can't work. ... I have no room left for tax cuts if I continue on this path, no room for education. So it needs to be restructured." While claiming to oppose a two-tier health care system, Romanow said he favored exploring "private-sector involvement" in the provision of medical services.



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