

Canada: Saskatchewan New Democratic Party forms coalition with Liberals

A correspondent
2 October 1999

The Saskatchewan New Democratic Party (NDP), which has formed Saskatchewan's provincial government since 1991, has entered into a coalition with the Liberals, the third party in the provincial legislature. In exchange for two cabinet seats and the post of speaker, the Liberals have pledged to sit side-by-side with the social-democratic NDP in government for the next four years. According to Premier Roy Romanow, the rival parties will be "full partners in managing the government."

Unlike in Europe, coalitions are rare in Canada. When no party has a majority of the seats in a legislature, the largest party, or in rare instances the second largest, forms a minority government.

In announcing the coalition agreement and the composition of his new cabinet, Romanow refused to say what policy changes the NDP would make to accommodate the Liberals. Now, he insisted, was not the time to go into "details." But the premier added he was confident the two parties could work effectively together because they shared a commitment to supporting public education and health, while maintaining a balanced budget and reducing taxes.

In fact, Romanow recently mused about the need to expand private sector involvement in the provision of healthcare and, to curry favor with the Liberals, has all but officially repudiated an NDP promise to eliminate tuition fees for first-year college and university students.

To accolades from the big business press, the Saskatchewan NDP regime has imposed dramatic cuts in social spending. Even the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional voice of Canada's Tory and financial establishment, urged that the Romanow government be returned to power in the September 16 provincial election.

There are definite parliamentary compulsions behind the coalition agreement. In last month's election the NDP won exactly half of the 58 seats in the Saskatchewan legislature. Had the NDP succeeded in having one of its own elected speaker, it could have been outvoted at any time by the opposition parties. Moreover, both the NDP and the Liberals were stunned by the surge in support for the right-wing Saskatchewan Party.

Formed only two years ago by eight dissident Liberal and Tory legislators and backed by the federal Reform Party, the Saskatchewan Party more than tripled its seats and topped the popular vote tally by capitalizing on farmers' dissatisfaction over declining grain prices. The NDP and Liberals thus concluded they had a mutual interest in averting an early return to the polls.

But the NDP-Liberal coalition also attests to the blurring of party lines under conditions where all the parties have moved sharply to the right and repudiated the reformist policies of the postwar boom. Romanow is an admirer of British Prime Minister Tory Blair, who has made no secret of his ambition to bring about a realignment of British politics through a merger of his New Labour Party with the Liberals.

Following last June's Ontario election, former Ontario NDP Premier Bob Rae called for an institutionalized alliance between the Ontario New Democrats and the Liberals. Not only, argued Rae, was such an alliance needed to deny the Tories a third straight election victory in Ontario, but all over the world social democrats and liberals were finding common ground. Anticipating Rae's call, a faction of the trade union bureaucracy, led by Canadian Auto Workers President Buzz Hargrove, called for a "strategic vote" for the Liberals in Ontario's June 3 election in ridings where the Liberal was most likely to defeat the Tory

candidate.



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