

British Columbia elections: social democrats pave reaction's road to power

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Power in British Columbia, Canada's third most populous province, is passing into the hands of a new government pledged to impose "dramatic" tax cuts, gut work and environmental standards, abolish workers' right to strike and promote the de-unionization of the construction industry.

"We have a very aggressive and bold agenda to pursue," proclaimed Premier-elect Gordon Campbell Wednesday evening, shortly after his B.C. Liberal Party scored one of the most lopsided electoral victories in Canadian history.

With 57.5 percent of the popular vote, Campbell's Liberals captured 73 of the 76 seats in the B.C. legislature. Meanwhile, the social-democratic New Democratic Party, B.C.'s ruling party since 1991, fell from office with a crash. The NDP's share of the popular vote was nearly halved, falling from almost 40 percent in the last election, held in 1996, to just 21.5 percent. Not only did Premier Ujjal Dosanjh and most of his cabinet colleagues lose their seats; the NDP failed to elect enough members to even hold on to official party status in the legislature.

The B.C. Liberals and Canada's current national governing party share a common name. But they are two distinct groupings. Indeed, it is well-recognized by the media and in political circles that the B.C. Liberals are much closer to the right-wing Canadian Alliance than to the federal Liberal Party of Prime Minister Jean Chretien.

"For the next two or three years," enthused *Globe and Mail* columnist and conservative ideologue John Ibbitson, "British Columbia will be the most interesting place in Canada. Last night, B.C. voters gave Liberal leader Gordon Campbell an emphatic mandate to launch British Columbians down the same road that Albertans and Ontarians have already trodden under [Alberta Tory Premier] Ralph Klein and [Ontario Tory Premier] Mike Harris."

For his part, Klein was quick to welcome Campbell as kith and kin. Speaking Wednesday evening, the Alberta Premier said that the governments of Canada's two westernmost provinces will henceforth collaborate much more closely. "I've had brief discussions with Gordon Campbell and I've indicated to him that we would make our programs available to him and how we achieved those programs."

Klein went on to warn the premier-elect not to underestimate the opposition he will encounter: "I don't know if it is going to be as easy for Mr. Campbell to do what we did because he is going from a New Democratic government to a conservative government under a Liberal name."

"The changes that he proposes to make relative to labour law, to issues surrounding treaties with the aboriginal people in B.C. I think are going to be very contentious and very difficult for him to deal with."

Campbell has made no secret of the fact that he intends to make common cause with the Tory governments of Alberta and Ontario in pressing for the federal government's role in shaping social policy to be sharply curtailed and for equalization, the transfers the richer provinces make to the poorer provinces, to be reduced. Big business and the right see decentralization as a means of eroding if not ultimately eliminating public services like Medicare, the country's universal public health scheme.

Declared Campbell in a recent interview, "I'm what I call a Zen federalist. If they [the federal government] do less, they'll actually do more for the country."

Campbell and his big business sponsors will try to intimidate any and all opponents to their right-wing agenda by pointing to the Liberals' majority share of the popular vote and massive legislative majority. But even pollsters concede that the vote for the Liberals was largely a negative one: that many people voted for the Liberals

without enthusiasm, but so as to be rid of the NDP.

Recognizing that many voters are wary of their links to big business and the Canadian Alliance, the Liberals tried to camouflage their intentions by proclaiming in their platform that they will increase spending on health care and education. Of course, they never explained how they can do this while drastically cutting taxes and balancing the provincial budget. But Campbell has given himself an out. The Liberal leader has repeatedly claimed that he distrusts the NDP government's budget figures and no doubt will soon be coming before the electorate to say the province's finances are in a horrendous state.

There is a striking parallel between the fate of the NDP regimes that came to power in Ontario in 1990 and in British Columbia in 1991, although the initial victory of the B.C. NDP was much more directly linked to mass worker struggles—struggles against the Social Credit governments of Bill Bennett and Bill Vander Zalm that the NDP worked might and main to contain within the sterile framework of reformist protest.

Both the Ontario and B.C. NDP regimes responded to the 1991-92 slump by jettisoning the modest reforms outlined in their election platforms in favor of capitalist austerity. They slashed social spending, imposed onerous tax hikes, and cut public sector workers' real wages.

By betraying and suppressing the working class, Ontario's NDP government and their allies in the trade union bureaucracy paved the way for the most right-wing government in Ontario history to come to power in 1995. Posing as the spokesman for the aggrieved “little man” and as “radical” opponents of the status quo, the Harris Tories won election on a program inspired by the US Republicans' “Contract with America.”

B.C.'s social democrats came within a whisker of joining their Ontario brethren in opposition following the 1996 provincial election. In 1996, the B.C. NDP actually won less votes than the Liberals did, but due to the quirks of the first-past-the-post electoral system nonetheless secured a majority of seats in the legislature.

Over the past five years, the B.C. NDP government continued along the same right-wing trajectory, closing hospitals, breaking strikes and cutting corporate taxes. But big business, particularly after B.C. was battered by the 1997 Asian economic crisis, became ever more anxious that B.C. was falling behind other jurisdictions in the race to dismantle what remains of the welfare state. It wants all restraints on big business's drive for profit removed.

The union bureaucracy's response to the impending clash between the working class and the incoming Liberal

government has been to announce its readiness to work with Campbell. Indeed, for some time the B.C. union officialdom has been at pains to put distance between itself and the NDP, in part so as to open channels with the Liberals and in part because of the rank and file's intense animosity toward the social democrats.

For the NDP, its rout in the B.C. election is nothing short of a heart attack, and this for a political body already on life support. (In last November's federal election the NDP won only 13 seats, one more than the minimum to have official party status, and just 8.5 percent of the vote.)

Historically, nowhere in Canada have the ties between the industrial working class and social democracy been stronger than in B.C.. Prior to Wednesday, in provincial elections dating back to 1933, the NDP or its predecessor the CCF, had never won less than 7 seats and at least 27 percent of the vote.

So desperate was the NDP's plight in the final days of the campaign that some party officials are taking solace in the fact the party at least won three of the legislature's 76 seats. A week before the vote, Premier Dosanjh took an unprecedented step for the leader of a governing party and publicly conceded that the NDP was going into opposition. This was part of a survival strategy that focused on convincing former NDP supporters not to abstain or vote for the Greens, for fear that the Liberals might be left with no opposition in the legislature whatsoever. This tactic had some limited success. While opinion polls showed the NDP and the Greens running neck-and-neck, each with about 15 percent popular support, one week prior to the vote, the NDP ultimately captured 21.5 percent. The Greens, who in the 1996 election had won the support of just 2 percent of British Columbia voters, increased their tally to 12.4 percent.



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