Race to lead Canada's social democrats limps to finish

Keith Jones
24 January 2003

Canada's social democrats will choose a new federal party leader this weekend after a half-year long campaign that has generated little public interest or enthusiasm.

Whilst New Democratic Party (NDP) spin-doctors are claiming that a 40 percent growth in membership points to an NDP revival, the real numbers only serve to underline the extent of the party's crisis. Since Alexa McDonough announced her intention to step down as party leader last June, the NDP has increased its membership nationwide by 24,000 to just 82,000. Of every thousand Canadians, less than three belong to the NDP.

Since it came to provincial office in the early 1990s in three provinces with more than half of Canada's total population, the NDP has suffered a succession of electoral debacles. Working people turned to the NDP to shield them from the impact of a severe recession and the reorganization of Canadian capitalism under the recently concluded Canada-US Free Trade Agreement. Instead, the social democrats emerged as the champions of capitalist austerity. The Ontario NDP government of Bob Rae cut billions from social and public services, imposed wage- and job-cutting contracts on a million public sector workers, eliminated grants to post-secondary students, and pioneered workfare.

In the 2000 federal election the NDP won just 8.5 percent of the popular vote, less than half the percentage it routinely won in elections in the 1970s and 1980s. It currently holds 14 of the 301 House of Commons seats, including just two from Ontario, two from British Columbia, and none from Quebec. The NDP holds provincial office only in Manitoba and in Saskatchewan, where a minority NDP government is propped up by Liberal votes. In the May 2001 British Columbia election the NDP, after a decade in office, won just 2 of 77 seats and saw much of its traditional vote go to the Greens.

None of the six candidates for the federal NDP leadership has raised, let alone seriously addressed, the question as to why the NDP and its sister social democratic parties the world over have joined in the big business assault on the welfare state policies that they once held up as proof capitalism could by humanized through incremental reform.

The bulk of the party establishment and the trade union bureaucracy has lined up behind either Bill Blaikie or Jack Layton.

A long-time MP and a United Church minister, Blaikie has strongly defended the NDP's current program and orientation. In so far as he has suggested any modification it would be to lay even greater emphasis on the NDP's promotion of Canadian nationalism. Blaikie and the NDP point to the rapacious policies being pursued by the Bush administration and the transnationals not to advocate the unity of the international working class against capital, but to urge Canadian workers to join with big business to defend a supposedly more benign Canadian capitalism, its state and its markets.

Blaikie has the support of six fellow MPs, Manitoba Premier Gary Doer, Ontario NDP leader Howard Hampton and much of the labor officialdom from Western Canada.

Jack Layton has been active in NDP circles for decades and is a veteran Toronto City Councilor. Yet he has used his lack of a House of Commons seat and his connections to various environmental, gay rights, peace and housing advocacy groups to cast himself as an outsider who would identify the NDP more closely with the anti-globalization and other protest movements. While not shunning the label of "left," he has repeatedly emphasized that he is a "doer" and a "unifier," pointing to his work on myriad municipal committees and as President of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

He has condemned the NDP Finance critic and fellow candidate Lorne Nystrom for fiscal irresponsibility for suggesting that the federal government not devote any additional dollars to paying off the national debt. Layton has also mused about the prospect of the NDP holding the balance of power in a minority parliament, where it would barter its support to the Liberals, Tories and/or Canadian Alliance.

Asked his opinion of the debate in the NDP over Tony Blair's unbridled pro-big business policies, Layton declared his aim was "to bridge those differences. ... I believe there is a potential there for some bridge building and working together."

Layton is supported by the MPs Svend Robinson and Libby Davis, who have long-fashioned themselves as left-wing critics of the NDP establishment. Former British Colombia NDP Premier Mike Harcourt, Canadian Union of Public Employees President Judy Darcy and Ontario Federation of Labour President Wayne Samuelson, who played a pivotal role in killing off the mass protests against the Ontario Tory government of Mike Harris, have also endorsed Layton's candidacy. Others supporting him include, former United Steelworkers of America International President Lynn Williams and Ed Broadbent, who headed the federal NDP from 1979 through 1989 and has now become the party's elder statesman.

Nystrom, an MP for three decades, has employed a standard-line

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of all right-wing politicians to attack his fellow candidates for their "tax and spend" policies.

Neither Bev Marlo, the candidate of the so-called Socialist Caucus and a supporter of the Council of Canadians—a nationalist organization founded by Edmonton publisher Mel Hurtig and headed by former Trudeau aide Maude Barlow—nor associate federal party president Pierre Ducasse are expected to win more than a fraction of the vote. Ducasse has advocated the NDP learn from the "Quebec model" of state-big business-union collaboration developed under the Parti Québécois and the Quebec Liberal Party.

Joe Comartin, a longtime lawyer for the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union and Windsor, Ontario, MP, is serving as a front man for the maneuvers of CAW President Buzz Hargrove. Hargrove considered contesting the NDP leadership himself, but conceded that there was little support for his candidacy either among the social-democratic or union officialdom.

Hargrove has frequently criticized the NDP for moving so far to the right as to render it indistinguishable from the Liberals. He believes an NDP with more traditional social-democratic policies would be a more effective instrument for the trade union bureaucracy to engage in political horse-trading with the government of the day and, more importantly, better serve to prevent the growth of a genuine movement for independent working class political struggle.

Hargrove's critics within the NDP and Canadian Labour Congress bitterly resent his verbal tirades against their right-wing policies. They note that when it comes to CAW affairs Hargrove is a strong advocate of corporatist collaboration with the auto bosses and in the last Ontario election was the keenest advocate of "strategic voting" for the right-wing Liberals.

Of the leadership candidates Comartin has most identified himself with the anti-war movement, visiting Iraq last fall and centering his membership drive among Arab and other Muslim immigrants to Canada.

While Comartin has said he would oppose any US invasion of Iraq, with or without United Nations Security Council approval, the position of the NDP as a whole is fraught with ambiguity. In keeping with its promotion of the myth of a pacific Canadian capitalism that can be a force for social progress in world affairs, the NDP has long been a strong supporter of United Nations intervention in inter-state conflicts and civil wars. It initially supported the 1999 NATO assault on Yugoslavia and has joined with the other parties in the House of Commons in calling for a multi-billion increase in military spending. Speaking at an anti-war rally last weekend, outgoing party leader Alexa McDonough said the UN inspectors should be left to do their work.

In a *Globe and Mail* op-ed piece published this week, academic and prominent left social-democratic theorist Leo Panitch touted the fact that none of the NDP leadership candidates is advocating British Prime Minister Tony Blair's "Third Way."

This is truly clutching at straws. The NDP provincial governments in Ontario and British Columbia played a pivotal role in the big business offensive against the working class. Not only did they impose capitalist austerity. They paved the way for the coming to power of two of the three most right-wing governments in Canada, as well as for the Chrétien Liberal government's spending cuts and tax breaks for the rich and super-rich. As for the Saskatchewan and Manitoba NDP regimes, at least until recently, they had no qualms about endorsing Blair's Third Way.

In 1999, McDonough and the federal NDP establishment launched a formal push to have the NDP explicitly rewrite its program and rethink its institutional ties with the trade unions in the light of the experience of Blair's New Labour.

If ultimately this was abandoned it was because the majority of the social democrats recognized that such a change would, as CAW President Hargrove insisted, be a ticket to political irrelevance and electoral oblivion since the Chrétien Liberals have already staked out their own claim to be the advocates of the Third Way.

The shattering of the stock market bubble, the wave of corporate scandals, the Walkerton tragedy, the deterioration of public services and increasing poverty and economic insecurity have dramatically eroded support for the big business program of privatization, deregulation and unfettered market even among broad sections of the middle class. Now the outbreak of imperialist war threatens to give a new and explosive edge to the class struggle. The more astute in the NDP and union leaderships are increasingly apprehensive about this class polarization. Moreover, they are painfully aware that their own influence over the working class has been greatly reduced.

Former NDP leader Ed Broadbent, in explaining why he had not endorsed his former colleague and personal friend Blaikie for the NDP leadership, warned that the next "NDP leader cannot rest on the illusion that all those many Canadians who are fed up with the policies derived from the cutback mania ... will inevitably swing to the NDP. ... They can swing right past us to any number of other options."

Subsequently, in a letter to the *Toronto Star*, Broadbent distanced himself from his previous praise of Blair, noting that under Blair Britain had actually spent less as a percentage of GDP on health and education than under Thatcher. "As a social democrat, I do indeed want a vigorous and innovative private sector in Canada. I want it, however, in conjunction with strong, equalizing social programs."

If many in the federal NDP leadership are now anxious to disassociate themselves from Blair, it is not because they are any less committed than he is to the defence of capitalism. They recognize that the British prime minister has become so closely identified with the free market policies of Thatcher and her acolytes and with Bushs war agenda as to make him a liability. Their aim is to salvage the NDP so it can better serve as a means of defending a vigorous private sector and blocking the development of a genuine independent working class political movement based on socialist and internationalist principles.

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