

Canada's NDP opts for leader promising image makeover

Keith Jones
30 January 2003

Toronto City Councillor Jack Layton won a decisive first ballot victory in last Saturday's vote to determine the leader of Canada's social-democratic party—the New Democrats or NDP.

Layton exploited his lack of parliamentary experience and his connection to various peace, environmental and homeless advocacy groups to cast himself as an “outsider” who could revive the NDP's fortunes by appealing to working people alienated from traditional party politics. In this he was assisted by early endorsements from MPs Svend Robinson and Libby Davies, who have frequently criticized the NDP as too right-wing, and by others associated with the New Politics Initiative

Yet if Layton was able to secure an easy victory over five other candidates, including NDP House leader Bill Blakie and two other sitting MPs, it was because the party establishment and trade union bureaucracy embraced his leadership bid.

Prominent among Layton's supporters were Judy Darcy, president of the country's largest union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, and Wayne Samuelson, who on becoming president of the Ontario Federation of Labour in late 1997 shut down the mass protests against the provincial Tory government. Most important of all was the support that Layton received from Ed Broadbent, the federal NDP leader from 1975 to 1989.

Broadbent placed Layton's name in nomination and sat by his side for much of the convention.

For his part, Layton has been quick to claim Broadbent as his mentor.

During the 1990s, the NDP, like social-democratic parties the world over, moved sharply to the right, actively participating in the dismantling of the very social welfare programs they once held up as proof

capitalism could be humanized through collective bargaining and parliamentary reforms. In Ontario, the NDP government of Bob Rae came into headlong conflict with the working class, slashing billions from public and social services, imposing a wage- and job-cutting “social contract” on one million public sector workers, eliminating grants for post-secondary students and initiating the transformation of welfare into workfare.

As a result, the NDP suffered a massive decline in its electoral support. In the last federal election it won only 8.5 percent of the popular vote and just managed to elect sufficient MPs to cling to official party status in the House of Commons.

But Layton was quick to take exception when a CBC Radio interviewer suggested that the collapse in support for the NDP was due to its having abandoned its “natural base.” “That wasn't my observation,” said Layton. “I don't think it was that [the NDP] moved to the centre particularly or tried to compete with the Liberals ...” Layton's alternative explanation for the NDP's crisis is that its core message has gotten lost in too many policy statements.

Earlier, Layton distanced himself from those who want the NDP to place on record its opposition to British Prime Minister Tony Blair's Third Way, saying he aims to bridge the differences between those in the party urging the NDP emulate Blair and those who criticize his unbridled pro-big business program.

Throughout his campaign, Layton was at pains to present himself as both media savvy and a pragmatic politician. He pointed to his experience on Toronto City Council to show that he understood the importance of “fiscal responsibility” and had personally “matured,” evolving from “mere opposition” to the politics of “proposition.”

That said, it is clear that in selecting Layton, Canada's social democrats are seeking to reposition themselves in response to growing anti-big business sentiment, mounting anxiety over increasing poverty and economic insecurity, and the burgeoning opposition to a US invasion of Iraq.

Whilst the substance of Layton's politics is no different from that of his rivals, he emphasized the need to give the NDP a more radical image. He argues for the social democrats to switch their focus from parliamentary debates to "campaigning," that is to associating with the anti-war, anti-globalization and other protest movements.

By such a makeover, the social democrats hope to boost their electoral fortunes. But the principal concern of the most politically astute among them is that the influence of the social democrats and the trade unions has been so eroded that they could be brushed aside by a radicalized working class.

Broadbent articulated this clearly in a letter explaining his surprise decision to endorse Layton over Blaikie, a long-time colleague. It would be a mistake, explained Broadbent, to assume that growing popular opposition to the big business offensive of the past decade will fall under the leadership of the social democrats: "They can swing right past us to any number of other options."

The same concerns lie behind the NDP's turn toward the anti-war movement. At the urging of outgoing party leader Alexa McDonough, the delegates to last weekend's convention stood and repeatedly chanted "No war in Iraq." Whilst the NDP had previously suggested it would support action against Iraq if sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council, Layton and other prominent New Democrats have now gone on record as saying they would oppose Canadian participation in an invasion of Iraq, even if given UN sanction, and that any war on Iraq would be unjustified.

The NDP is seeking to impart a Canadian nationalist orientation to the anti-war movement, portraying the war drive not as an expression of the essential tendencies of capitalism, but simply a particularly rapacious American strand. Thus they contend that if pressure is brought on the Chrétien Liberal government, the Canadian state can be a force for peace and international progress.

Needless to say, this is diametrically the opposite of a

socialist struggle to oppose war through the mobilization of the international working class against capitalism.

Layton is now trying to appeal, even if only meekly, to the deep chord of popular opposition to the big business offensive against the working class, while simultaneously trying to reassure Canada's economic and political elite that he is a "player" whom they can trust and work with. Thus, in his victory speech, he both denounced the Liberals for implementing the agenda of ultra-right Canadian Alliance and held out hope that after the next election the NDP would hold the balance of power and could barter its support to the Liberals, the traditional governing party of Canadian capital.



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