

Canada's social democrats court “progressive” Tories

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12 November 2003

Jack Layton, the federal leader of the New Democratic Party, has issued a public appeal to “progressive” Tories and disaffected Liberal politicians to join the ranks of Canada’s social democratic party.

Titled “The NDP welcomes all progressives,” Layton’s appeal first appeared in the October 23 issue of the *National Post*, the house organ of Canada’s neo-conservatives. It argues that the impending merger of Canada’s two right-wing parties—the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives (PC)—and the imminent ascension of Paul Martin—the multi-millionaire businessman who as Finance Minister presided over massive public spending and tax cuts—to the Liberal Party leadership and Prime Ministership leave “progressives” in Canada’s two traditional governing parties without influence. “[P]rogressives of all stripes,” affirms Layton must “challenge this rightward realignment” by coming together in “a viable, growing political party”—the NDP.

Layton’s appeal underscores the ever rightward trajectory of the NDP. Like social-democratic parties the world over, the NDP has abandoned even its traditional reform program and where it has held office over the past decade—Ontario, British Columbia and Saskatchewan—has slashed public and social services, embraced workfare and attacked trade union rights.

Layton’s appeal is directed, in the first instance, at David Orchard, an organic farmer and vehement opponent of Canada-US free trade, who finished second at the Tories’ 1998 federal leadership convention and emerged as the kingmaker in the Tories’ most recent leadership race. “Mr. Orchard’s influence on the PC party is admirable,” writes Layton, “as are his deep convictions about the necessity for sustainability and sovereignty.”

Most of the Tory party establishment and their big

business supporters have scant regard for Orchard, viewing him as an outsider and an interloper. Nonetheless, Orchard has succeeded in integrating himself into the ranks of Canada’s traditional right-wing party, winning about a quarter of the vote in successive federal PC leadership races. At last May’s Tory convention he struck a deal with Peter MacKay, the candidate of the party old guard. In exchange for Orchard delivering him the votes he needed to become leader, MacKay agreed to give Orchard supporters some party posts and made a pledge—since broken—not to negotiate a merger with the Canadian Alliance.

For the better part of a decade, Orchard has pressed for the Tories to return to “their deep and honourable” roots as the foremost opponents of the Liberal “idea of merging our country with our southern neighbour.” A monarchist and fiscal conservative, Orchard points to Sir John A. Macdonald, the chief political spokesman for the banking and railway interests that engineered the creation of Canada’s federal state, and Sir Robert Borden, who imposed conscription during World War I and crushed the 1919 Winnipeg general strike, as exemplars of the Tory tradition he upholds.

Orchard’s denunciations of the Liberals as pro-US “annexationists” aside, his claim that the Tories were historically the party most identified with anti-Americanism is accurate. By maintaining privileged ties with the British Empire, imposing high tariffs on manufactures, and engineering a land grab of what became the Canadian West, the Tories sought to strengthen the Canadian bourgeoisie vis a vis its US rivals.

But in reaction to the post-Second World War decline in Britain’s world position, repeated economic crises in the 1970s and 1980s, and the growth of multinational trading blocs, the Mulroney Conservative government

of 1984-93 affected a fundamental shift in the class strategy of Canadian capital. The century-old National Policy was abandoned, as the Tories negotiated first the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, then NAFTA. In keeping with this shift, the Mulroney Tories, to Orchard's dismay, also moved to sell off many of Canada's Crown Corporations, which had traditionally served as a means of bolstering the development of Canadian business.

Like Orchard, the NDP—which made common cause in opposing the 1988 free trade agreement with that section of Canadian capital that feared greater US competition—venerates the Tory tradition of “Canadian nation-building.” Thus in his appeal, Layton has kind words for the founder of Canadian Toryism and die-hard opponent of the American liberal-democratic tradition, Sir John A. Macdonald. For decades, the NDP has encouraged workers to identify with the Canadian state and Canadian business by drawing a false contrast between a purportedly more pacific and communitarian Canadian capitalism, and a rapacious and militaristic US variety.

But Layton has more than just Orchard in his sights. He even touts the “progressive” credentials of former Prime Minister Joe Clark, whose coming to power in 1979 paralleled that of Thatcher in Britain and Reagan in the US, although Clark and the Tories quickly fell from power after authoring a right-wing, austerity budget. Subsequently, Clark served as one of Mulroney's top cabinet ministers. According to Layton, “the NDP, which elected more MPs than the Tories in each of the past three elections, is a more efficient vehicle for progressives currently within the PC party.”

The NDP leader also has kind words for members of the current Liberal government, which in terms of social policy has been the most reactionary since the Great Depression. Boasts Layton, “there are many Liberals in Parliament, and beyond who find common cause with New Democrats on economic, environmental and social policy.”

It remains to be seen whether Layton fishing for “progressives” in the Canada's two traditional parties of big business produces any recruits. What is abundantly clear is that the NDP is a party of the Canadian establishment, utterly alien and opposed to the most elementary interests of the working class.



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