

Canada's social democrats helping sustain big business Liberals in power

Keith Jones
16 October 2004

Canada's social-democrats, who are organized in the New Democratic Party or NDP, are working to sustain Prime Minister Paul Martin and his Liberal minority government in office. Martin, who as Jean Chrétien's finance minister implemented the greatest cuts in public and social services in the country's history, then rewarded big business and the well-to-do with a 5-year \$100 billion program of corporate and personal income tax cuts, fell some twenty seats short of a parliamentary majority in last June's election. But for the foreseeable future, he and his Liberal government can count on the support of the 19-member NDP delegation in the House of Commons.

Soon after parliament met this month for the first time since the election, the New Democrats let it be known that they will vote in favor of the Liberals' Throne Speech, the general statement of the government's legislative agenda that opens every new session of parliament. The Throne Speech underscored the Liberals' rightward evolution. It recycled various promises, some of more than a decade old, to meet various crying social needs, while emphasizing the need to make Canada's economy more internationally competitive through deregulation ("smarter government"), a renewed commitment to scale back government spending, and further tax cuts.

During the summer the NDP had joined with the Conservatives and the Bloc Québécois in demanding a greater role for the opposition in the new parliament. But federal NDP leader Jack Layton quickly disassociated himself from the attempts of the other opposition parties to amend the Throne Speech. To much applause from the corporate-controlled media, Layton denounced the other party leaders for playing political games by threatening to defeat the government on a matter of confidence and pledged his party's readiness to "make the new parliament," in which the traditional governing parties of the ruling class—the Liberals and Conservatives—have an overwhelming majority, "work."

In keeping with this, Layton made the mildest criticisms of the Throne Speech, while savaging the Conservatives for allying with the pro-Quebec *indépendantiste* BQ. It certainly is significant that the BQ, which enjoys the support of the trade union bureaucracy in Quebec and portrays itself as a progressive party, has been so ready to work with the Conservatives. When everything is said and done, there is significant common ground between them as both parties favor a major devolution of political power to the provinces. But Layton's attack was from the standpoint of Canadian nationalism and the defense of the Canadian state, not the interests of the working class.

The sharp increase in support for the NDP in the last election—it won a million more votes, while both the Liberals and Conservative lost support—indicates a growing political radicalization, fueled by the US-British invasion and occupation of Iraq, mounting economic insecurity and social inequality, the discrediting of the neo-liberal nostrums of privatization and deregulation by the Walkerton water poisoning tragedy, SARS and other public security crises, and the widespread evidence of corporate malfeasance.

The NDP election campaign made a calibrated appeal to popular discontent. Layton charged Martin, a shipping magnate, and Conservative leader Stephen Harper with wanting to reward their big business friends. He also tapped into public hostility to the Bush administration's militarist agenda, by criticizing the invasion of Iraq and touting the NDP's opposition to the US's provocative nuclear missile defence program.

But even when on the election hustings, Layton and the NDP leadership could not repress their glee at the prospect of a hung parliament in which the NDP could trade its votes for influence over a Liberal minority government. Indeed, Layton began to indicate that some parts of the social democrats' program, such as the NDP's call for electoral reform, would figure in a future

negotiation with the Liberals, while others, like the call for a partial inheritance tax, would not.

Immediately after the election, when it appeared the NDP had won in excess of 20 seats and would hold the balance of power, a gushing Jack Layton told reporters he would be ready to consider a formal partnership with the Liberals and might even take a seat in the federal cabinet.

Subsequently, however, it emerged that the NDP House of Commons delegation would not be large enough on its own to secure the Liberals a majority.

The NDP, their supporters in the union bureaucracy, the publishers of *rabble.ca* and other self-styled radicals make two claims in justifying support for the Martin-led Liberals.

First, they argue that in the 1960s and early 1970s the NDP was able to secure progressive legislation from the Pearson and Trudeau minority Liberal governments. This is a highly distorted reading of history. Not only does it overlook the international bourgeoisie's repudiation of the reformist, social-welfare and Keynesian policies that it pursued during the post-Second World War economic boom. It also covers up the fact that the NDP came into headlong conflict with the growing working-class radicalization that was triggered by mounting economic problems at the end of the 1960s, the Vietnam War and worldwide popular unrest. Federal NDP leader David Lewis, who had been sustaining the Liberals in office for almost two years, was aghast in 1974 when striking railway workers invaded the parliament buildings. More fundamentally, NDP governments in British Columbia, Manitoba and Saskatchewan broke strikes and implemented Trudeau's three-year wage control program, which launched the ruling class counter-offensive that has continued to this day.

In the intervening three decades, the NDP, in lock step with the bourgeoisie's lurch rightward, has shed much of its reformist program and wherever it has held office over the past 15 years—most importantly in Ontario and British Columbia—has imposed social spending cuts and attacked worker rights.

The second claim made by the social democrats and their advocates is that an NDP *de facto* coalition with the Liberals is the only way to keep right-wing Tories from coming to office.

The Tories, led by the neo-conservative ideologue Stephen Harper, speak for the most rapacious sections of Canadian capital whose model is the Bush administration. But key sections of the ruling class, including such voices of the establishment as the *Globe and Mail*, remain

apprehensive that a Tory government could endanger their interests by igniting a social firestorm, by pursuing all-out confrontation with the working class and trying to impose retrograde social conservative values. There are also concerns that the Tories would favor Western-based oil and other interests over those of the bank and manufacturing titans of central Canada.

Thus, for the moment, the dominant section of Canadian capital prefers that the Liberals remain in office, while using Harper and the Tories to prod them further right.

If the Liberals have been the principal governing party of the Canadian bourgeoisie for more than a century, it is precisely because of their ability to marry progressive and populist appeals with a ruthless defence of the interests of big business. A key reason that popular illusions in the Liberals, while frayed, have not been incontrovertibly broken, is that the social democrats and union bureaucrats continue to work to sustain them.

During the past 11 years, Chrétien and Martin have used the new Conservative Party and its right-wing populist predecessors, the Reform Party and Canadian Alliance, as right-wing foils, while adopting and implementing their agenda—be it on the need for a “war on the deficit,” regressive changes to unemployment benefits, massive tax cuts for business and the most privileged, limiting the rights of refugees, or threatening Quebec with partition in the event of secession.

The NDP, meanwhile, functions as an integral part of the big business political set up, working to deflect and divert popular opposition, while upholding the inviolability of big business' control over the economy and the two major-party federal political system.

The NDP's role in sustaining the Martin-led Liberal government only underscores that it is a capitalist party and that the independent political mobilization of the working class against imperialist war and the ever-widening assault on public and social services and democratic rights will only take place in a determined struggle against it.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact