

Canada's social democrats lend support to the Conservative government in the name of the environment

Richard Dufour
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A little over a year has passed since Canada's social democratic party—the New Democratic Party or NDP—sided with Stephen Harper's Conservatives in making Liberal government corruption the principal issue in the January 2006 federal election, thus helping Harper camouflage his neo-conservative views and pave the way for a minority Conservative government.

By aligning with the Conservatives in their diversionary anti-corruption campaign, Canada's social democrats sought to put some distance between themselves and the Liberals, whose minority government they had sustained in office for more than half a year beginning in the spring of 2005. The NDP's actions dovetailed with the wishes of big business, which had wearied of the 12 year-old Liberal government of Jean Chretien and Paul Martin even though it had imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, slashed taxes on business and the rich, dramatically increased military spending, and otherwise pursued a right-wing agenda.

Now, with the Conservatives facing mounting popular opposition to Canada's participation in the US-led war on Afghanistan and anxious to secure a majority in a new election—that could come as early as this spring—so that they can press forward with their big business and militarist agenda, the NDP has once again come to the aid of Harper. In recent days, federal NDP leader Jack Layton and other NDP frontbenchers have let it be known that the NDP is ready to lend the Conservatives their parliamentary support in exchange for policy concessions, particularly in respect to the environment.

High-level contacts between the two formations have intensified since a Liberal MP defected to the Conservatives earlier this month, raising the Conservative seat tally in the 308-member House of Commons to 125. As a result the NDP, which has 29 MPs, now has the requisite parliamentary clout to sustain Harper's minority government in office on its own.

On January 10, Layton met with the new Conservative Environment Minister John Baird for half an hour to apprise him of the NDP's position on climate change.

While it remains to be seen whether Canada's social democrats will go so far as to vote for the Conservative budget in March—one option being considered by Harper is to provoke new elections by tabling a budget so tilted towards big business that the opposition parties will have little choice but to reject it—Layton and the NDP

have repeatedly made it clear that they are not in principal opposed to propping up a Conservative government.

For example on January 8, Layton said that the NDP would consider the Conservative's legislative agenda on an "issue by issue" basis and would not commit to supporting the Conservative budget and other "confidence" votes at least until there are "dramatic changes" in the government's environmental policies.

The rapprochement between Canada's ostensibly "left" party and the Conservative government, a regime that the Bush administration considers to be among its closest international allies, is being justified by the social democrats on the basis of the urgent need to address global warming. This issue has been seized upon by Layton to advocate a new relationship with the traditional governing parties of Canadian capital, as "an occasion to put aside the usual political shenanigans and actually produce some results."

Earlier this month he was asked in a CBC television interview, "How far are you willing to go working with Stephen Harper on the [government's] Clean Air Act to keep his [government] alive?" Layton did not preclude supporting the government. Neither did he denounce Harper's environmental bill, in which the earliest target-year for any reduction in Canada's greenhouse gas emissions is 2050.

Layton adopted a conciliatory tone, promising to "come up with something that all of the parties will support." (Last fall the NDP was instrumental in preventing the Conservatives' misnamed "Clean Air Act" from being effectively defeated in parliament, instead allowing it to be referred to a parliamentary committee for "amendments".)

When the interviewer alluded to the "interests" behind the Conservatives' indifference to global warming—Canada's oil and gas industry would be at the top of the list—Layton rejected any suggestion that the environmental crisis is a class issue, the product of the subordination of the economy and society to the pursuit of private profit, and the division of the world into a system of competing nation-states.

The real problem, Layton argued, is that people have not reconciled "the crisis we face in the planet with their responsibility to act . . . [I]t's time for us to put aside the partisan issues."

The warning about partisanship was meant to reassure Canada's corporate elite that the NDP is a "responsible" party, wholly committed to the defence of the existing social order—that its call

last fall for the withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan was a political ploy, aimed at rallying votes and preventing the emergence of a genuine opposition to Canadian imperialism.

Layton's attack on "partisanship" was also an appeal for the ruling elite—whose global ambitions are very much centered on Canada's potential to be an "energy superpower" due to her abundant reserves of oil and natural gas—to rise above their sectional interests and forge a consensus national policy.

Some sections of Canadian business, such as the oil and gas producers and the automakers, are opposed to significant new environmental regulation that would force them to invest in cleaner technology and thereby threaten their profit margins.

Others believe that a market for "green" products is emerging and that some form of international regulation of carbon emissions is inevitable. They argue that rather than resisting these developments, the Canadian government and business should try to turn them to their advantage. These sections of the elite argue that whilst the US may be powerful enough to force changes to the carbon-emissions regime at a later date, the interests of Canadian business would be better served if Canada was at the table from the beginning and therefore well-placed to press for regulations tailored to its plans to massively increase exploitation of Alberta's petroleum tar sands.

This is the stance of the new Liberal Party leader Stephane Dion. "Canada will cut megatons of emissions, but we will also make megatons of money," Dion said in a speech this week to the Economic Club of Toronto and the Toronto Board of Trade.

This position was echoed by Layton at an NDP Caucus Retreat last week where he told his colleagues that "environmentally sustainable new industries and new technologies will be the cornerstone of 21st century job creation."

The reactionary economic nationalism underlying Layton's positions came out in a dispute with Buzz Hargrove, head of the Canadian Auto Workers union, who had criticized the NDP's call for environmental regulations on the auto industry as a "job killer." Unless "our industry" changes its direction, Layton replied, "the efficient cars that people are looking for are going to be coming from China".

Hargrove, it should be noted, recently organized the CAW's disaffiliation from the NDP. Hargrove and the NDP leadership clashed over the CAW leader's call for the re-election of a minority Liberal government in the 2006 election, a government that Hargrove said should be supported by the NDP through an accord or by the NDP joining the Liberals in a formal coalition. The NDP leadership was not by any means opposed in principle to an alliance with the traditional governing party of Canadian big business—after all, the NDP had propped up the Liberals in the previous parliament. But the NDP leadership objected to Hargrove and the CAW openly promoting such an alliance during an election because they feared it would reduce the NDP's post-poll bargaining power.

Partly as an effort to appease concerns within the business community that Canada risks losing out in the development of "green" technologies and a "green" market, and partly to remove the public perception that they are global-warming deniers in the pocket of Alberta's oil industry, the Conservatives have been

forced in recent weeks to make some minor adjustments to their environmental policy.

A new environment minister was named at the beginning of the year, and a \$230-million fund for research on clean technologies was unveiled this week. Further announcements are expected in coming weeks including a revival of mothballed Liberal plans to boost the use of renewable energy and to give financial incentives to households that improve energy efficiency. The government is also considering short-term targets for minimal reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.

These moves are part of Harper's wooing of the NDP, which has also included warm praise for Layton's "co-operative" approach in parliament.

The Conservatives may ultimately decide to eschew the NDP's support and trigger an election. However, given their poor showing in the opinion polls, they want to keep their options open. In any event, a friendly dialogue with the social-democrats serves the Conservatives' interests.

To the extent that Layton takes Harper's belated interest in the environment seriously, works with him to revive the government's Clean Air Act, and does not make Canada's neo-colonial intervention in Afghanistan a matter of urgent national debate, the way is cleared for the ultra-right Conservatives to pose as moderates in their bid for a majority government.

Such an outcome would then set the stage for a dramatic escalation in the ruling class assault on working people at home and the oppressed peoples of Afghanistan and any future overseas target of Canadian imperialism.

Such a prospect, however, will not frighten Layton away from his present course. Countering suggestions that the NDP could end up in bed with a government comprised of Bush-friendly neo- and social conservatives, Layton claimed, "Our perspective has been pretty far from Mr. Harper's all the way along. However," he continued in a typical display of crass opportunism, "my view has always been in politics that you focus on trying to get results with whatever set of results has been laid on the table."

The "set of results" that has been "laid on the table" is the existing capitalist system, a system that has proven in the traumatic events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—the two world wars, fascist dictatorship, and numerous colonial wars—as well as in the current explosion of social inequality, economic insecurity, poverty and militarism, its inability to meet the economic, cultural and environmental needs of the world's peoples.

The development of a genuine socialist and internationalist opposition to Canadian big business will only be possible through an implacable struggle against the social democrats of the NDP.



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