

Canada's Greens: an aspirant establishment party

The German example

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As many as one in every ten Canadians who participate in the October 14 federal election will cast their vote for the Green Party, or at least so claim the opinion polls.

Whether the Greens do in fact more than double the 4.5 percent share of the popular vote they captured in the 2006 federal election remains to be seen. But taking advantage of increased popular interest, heightened media attention, and new party-financing legislation that provides them with a financial subsidy for every vote they won in 2006, the Greens have been far more active in this federal election than any previous one.

Green Party leader Elizabeth May secured a seat at the table in last week's two nationally televised leaders' debates, over the initial opposition of the Conservatives and the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP).

May has proclaimed the Greens "an anti-establishment party" and a "movement for change," while likening her party and its program to "successful" Green Parties in other countries, particularly the German Greens.

The Greens are benefiting from popular disaffection with the traditional parties, all of which have participated in the dismantling of public and social services, and from increasing concern with environmental issues, particularly global warming or climate change.

But far from offering any genuine alternative for working people, the Green Party is an unabashed defender of capitalism and an aspirant establishment party. They are contesting the current election in a quasi-electoral alliance with the Liberals, the Canadian ruling class' traditional party of government. The Liberal governments of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin, which held office from 1993 to early 2006, were the instrument through which Canadian big business imposed massive social spending and tax cuts, gutted unemployment insurance benefits, and launched the expansion and rearmament of the Canadian Armed Forces.

In April 2007, May and newly elected Liberal Party leader Stéphane Dion announced a pact under which the Liberals agreed not to stand a candidate against May, who is challenging Tory Defence Minister Peter MacKay in the Nova Scotia riding of Central Nova. In return the Greens promised not to oppose Dion's re-election. But the real purpose of the pact, from the Liberal perspective, was that it constituted an endorsement by May and the Greens of Dion's environmentalist credentials and signaled their support for the election of a Liberal government. The joint statement issued by Dion and May to announce their pact declared that "a government in which Stéphane Dion serves as Prime Minister" would "work well with a Green Caucus" to promote "action on climate."

May has claimed there is no truth to a *La presse* report that there is a secret understanding between the Liberals and the Greens that calls for her to issue an appeal in the final days of the election campaign for voters to cast a "strategic vote" for Liberal candidates, at least in some ridings, so as

to prevent the re-election of the Conservatives.

But during the campaign she has given several interviews in which she effectively supported the election of a Liberal government, even if the rallying of electors behind the Liberals in a bid "to stop Harper" resulted in the Greens failing to elect a single MP.

May told the weekly newsmagazine *Maclean's* "she prefers no Greens be elected if it meant the end" of Stephen Harper's Conservative regime.

Maclean's quotes May as saying, "It's not a partisan calculation. It's just that what offends me the most is Mr. Harper continuing in the direction he's taking us. ... I'm making it very clear we have to elect Green MPs and that Green MPs facing a Harper bench would be far worse than no Green MPs facing a Liberal minority bench. ... I don't understand how anyone who understands the climate crisis wouldn't feel that a Harper victory was more damaging than any other set of outcomes. I don't understand why [Bloc Québécois leader Gilles] Duceppe and [NDP leader Jack] Layton wouldn't also stand by that."

Both the Liberals and Greens advocate the imposition of a consumption tax on carbon emissions that would be offset by cuts to corporate and personal income taxes. The two parties only disagree on the size of the requisite "green shift," with the Liberals proposing a carbon tax that would ultimately raise \$15 billion annually and the Greens one that would produce \$50 billion per year in tax revenue.

Dion has promoted the Liberals' "green shift" as a program to boost corporate Canada in the struggle for markets and profits, by promoting energy efficiency, providing business with lower tax rates, and positioning Canadian business to take a leading role in the developing of "green technology."

Elizabeth May and the Greens share Dion's perspective. May frequently quotes her "good friend" former US President Bill Clinton as saying that the environmental crisis "presents this generation with the single largest economic opportunity in the history of human enterprise."

Courting Liberal and Tory MPs

While allying with the Liberals, the Greens have also sought to win over dissident Liberal and Conservative MPs. In late August, independent MP and former Liberal politician Blair Wilson announced he had joined the Greens, becoming the first ever Green member in a Canadian legislature. In jumping to the Greens, Wilson, who had been suspended from the Liberal parliamentary caucus for violating the Federal Election Act, was seeking to salvage his own career by appealing to the concerns around climate change in his British Columbia riding.

Previously May had courted avid tax-cutter Garth Turner. Turner, who was kicked out of the Tory caucus after criticizing Harper's appointment of a Liberal defector to the cabinet, weighed May's offer of joining the Greens for several weeks, before opting for the safer choice of becoming a Liberal.

May has also wooed longtime Nova Scotia Conservative Bill Casey, who was kicked out of the Conservative caucus after he voted against the last federal budget on the grounds it broke a government commitment to his province. May has proclaimed Casey an "honorary Green" and her party is not standing a candidate against him as he attempts to win re-election next Tuesday as an independent.

May's attempt to casting herself as a "non-politician" and "outsider" notwithstanding, she has spent years working the corridors of Ottawa and Canada's provincial capitals. She was executive director of the Sierra Club of Canada from 1989 to 2006. Prior to that, she was a policy adviser to Tom McMillan when he was the Environment Minister in Brian Mulroney's Progressive Conservative government. Two years ago, May publicly lauded Mulroney, whose government sought to introduce to Canada the aggressive anti-working class agenda of Britain's Margaret Thatcher and US President Ronald Reagan, as Canada's "greenest" prime minister.

May has promoted the Greens as something of a successor to the Progressive Conservative Party. [The current Conservative Party is the product of a merger of the right-wing populist Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives, the Canadian elite's traditional alternate party of government, although a tiny fraction of "Red Tories" balked at joining the new party.] May told Toronto's City TV that the Greens are akin to the Progressive Conservatives in that they are fiscally "small c" conservative, while attentive to social justice issues.

Further, in keeping with her protestations that the Greens are "not a left wing party," May has professed her personal opposition to abortion and argued in favor of "income splitting," a hobby horse of social and fiscal conservatives because it would provide a huge financial incentive for one member of a high-income couple (most likely the wife) to be a full-time parent.

The German example

The Canadian Greens touting of the European Green parties is both revealing and apt. The German Greens began as a middle-class protest party, espousing pacifism and social reform. But since they entered Germany's government in a coalition with the Social-Democrats in 1998, the Greens have moved sharply to the right, abandoning their pacifist views to become enthusiastic promoters of German international military deployments. In the face of massive popular opposition the Greens have, for example, championed Germany's involvement in the US war in Afghanistan.

In 2003-4, the Green-SPD coalition implemented its so-called Agenda 2010, the most far-reaching assault on social and welfare benefits in the history of modern Germany.

The Canadian Greens' platform for the 2006 federal election made no mention of the leading role the Canadian Armed Forces were, and are, playing in the Afghan War.

Soon after May replaced the ex-Progressive Conservative party functionary Jim Harris as Green Party leader, the Greens issued a call for Canada to end its counter-insurgency role in Afghanistan. But the Greens are in no way opposed to the US-imposed government in Kabul. They propose Canada maintain "a continued small Canadian military presence in Kabul" as well as "provide police training through the RCMP for the

Afghan police force." The Greens call for NATO to cede its place in Afghanistan to a UN peace-keeping mission, ignoring the fact that the current NATO occupation of Afghanistan has the UN's blessing.

The Greens' platform promotes the idea that Canadian capitalism can be a progressive force in the world--"the planet needs Canada." It advocates Ottawa "decrease," not end, "our contributions to NATO war efforts."

Paving the way for future Canadian military missions, if only they are under the banner of the UN, the Greens say that Canada should be a leader in "peace-making," the euphemism used to justify Canada's participation in the 1991 Iraq War and the subsequent decade-long embargo against Iraq.

To be sure, much of the Greens' appeal is bound up with its claim to be the environmental party and the party advocating the most urgent action on climate change.

The centerpiece of the Green election platform is its carbon tax scheme. The burden of this plan would fall on working people, since consumption taxes favor those with incomes large enough to save and the tax on carbon emissions would ultimately ripple through the economy, raising the cost of virtually every commodity,

The Greens tout the fact that a host of big business representatives including the Conference Board of Canada have endorsed the principal of a carbon tax. They could also add that big business economists have long advocated increasing consumption taxes, which are by their very nature regressive, and reducing corporate and personal income taxes, so as to further shift the burden of taxation from "investment and savings" (i.e., big business and the rich) and onto working people.

The Greens cynically pledge to use some of the windfall revenue from their carbon tax for social spending and the alleviation of poverty. At the same time, however, they claim that a carbon tax will combat the effects of climate change by fiscally discouraging the emission of greenhouse gases. This presents a contradiction: how might the Greens institute their paltry reforms from tax revenue that is designed to shrink? One is left to simply assume that, once the environmental crisis is miraculously solved by the market, the cuts to income and payroll taxes will remain and social spending will atrophy.

The idea that introducing a price mechanism can solve the mounting environmental crisis is absurd. Humanity's productive capacity, the vast expanses of infrastructure, natural resources, technology, and labour power that make up the economy, are controlled by a tiny bourgeois elite and directly subordinated to the interests of capital. The current environmental crisis is the direct result of the subordination of these immense forces to the interests of private profit and the division of the world into rival national-blocs of capitalists who compete for markets, resources, and pools of labour to exploit.

The Green Party in no way challenges these social relations; indeed, its solution to the environmental crisis is to work through the market, maximizing "efficiency" and lauding Canada's "highly innovative corporate culture." Under a thin coat of "progressive" paint, the Green Party's carbon tax is much more focused on the environment for Canadian big business than on the massive crisis which today confronts humanity internationally.

The Green Party should not be seen as some sort of "alternative" to the established parties; it is simply another shade in the spectrum of bourgeois politics. The only plausible way to effect the technological revolution necessary to avert environmental disaster is the appropriation of humanity's productive forces by the international working class. Production must be organized through a scientific, rational, and democratic plan in the interests of society as a whole, rather than in the interests of capital. This is the program fought for by the Socialist Equality

Party.



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