

Canada's Conservative government names NDP Premier its US ambassador

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Canada's Conservative government appointed veteran social democrat Gary Doer as its ambassador to the US last Friday, one day after Doer announced that he will be stepping down as Manitoba's Premier.

Because of the dense web of economic and military-strategic ties that bind Canada to the US, the post of US ambassador is both hugely important and politically sensitive.

Press commentators have frequently argued that the position should be raised to the equivalent of cabinet rank, if not given to a sitting cabinet minister. Others stress the importance of Canada's US envoy having the prime minister's complete confidence and ear.

As the representative of Stephen Harper's right-wing government in Washington, Doer will be charged with realizing the Conservatives' objective of deepening Canada's collaboration with the US on a vast number of issues. These include the Afghan War, Latin America, continental trade and security, and limiting carbon gas emissions while realizing Canada's oil tar-sands inspired ambition to become an "energy super-power."

Doer will replace Michael Wilson, who was finance minister in Brian Mulroney's Progressive Conservative government, then a senior Bay Street executive.

As Manitoba's premier for the past ten years, Doer developed close ties to many western US state governors, several of whom now hold important positions in Barack Obama's administration. Just as importantly, Doer's Tony Blair-type politics are seen as a "good fit" with a Democratic-controlled presidency and Congress. Fen Hampson, the director of Carleton University's Norman Paterson School of International Affairs and the co-author of a recent briefing paper on how the Harper government can improve relations with Washington, told Canwest News Service, "The fact that Doer comes from the NDP will be an asset in Obama's Washington ... Ambassador Wilson was the right man to deal with George Bush, and did the job splendidly, but he was politically off key with the new administration."

Doer's appointment as the Conservatives' Washington envoy came just two weeks after he was feted by the NDP at its national convention for exemplifying the party's "pragmatic"—i.e. right-wing, pro-big business—politics. A three-term Manitoba premier, Doer was held up as a "winner" and a "realist" in supposed contradistinction to the party's "ideologues"—those who make the occasional rhetorical reference to the Liberals and Conservatives as the parties of big business or call for greater Keynesian-type regulation of the corporations.

And the social democrats' celebration of Doer is continuing, even as he emerges as an important player in what is Canada's most right-wing government in living memory.

Federal NDP leader Jack Layton declared himself "delighted" with Doer's appointment. "Premier Gary Doer," gushed Layton, "is a statesman, respected by people across the political spectrum...[who] will help Canada establish a healthy working relationship with the Obama administration... New Democrats feel honoured to have one of our most

effective leaders chosen to play this significant role on behalf all Canadians."

Doer's right-wing record and his new appointment have been universally praised by the corporate media, including by the neoconservative *National Post*, whose owners, the Winnipeg-based Asper family, have frequently found in Doer an eager advocate. Doer, noted the *Post* editorial board, "supported the Afghan war, opposed the federal firearms registry [a right-wing bugbear], and could keep up with anybody when it came to fire-breathing law-and-order talk. Manitoba's business interests generally found him congenial (especially with regard to tax policies)..."

The praise from such quarters is justly deserved. Under Doer's leadership, the Manitoba NDP government continued many of the policies of its Conservative predecessor, adhering to a balanced-budget law which was designed to thwart new social spending initiatives, and implementing tax cuts heavily skewed in favor of business and the well-to-do. After Manitoba's corporate elite complained about some modest amendments to the province's labor code, Doer pledged that henceforth he would not proceed with any legislation that impacted on business without seeking and securing their support. A former head of the Manitoba Government Employees Association, Doer, early in his first term as premier, demonstrably sought to loosen the NDP's ties to the trade unions by enacting legislation that prohibited unions from making contributions to political parties.

Doer and the NDP's Halifax convention

For the past quarter century any discussion of the NDP's evolution has invariably necessitated the use of an expression like "further" or "still further to the right." That said, the national convention the NDP held in Halifax last month and at which Doer was a keynote speaker represented something of a watershed.

Late last fall, as world capitalism was being convulsed by the initial shocks of its greatest crisis since the Great Depression, the NDP, with the enthusiastic support of the Canadian Labour Congress and the rest of the labour bureaucracy, agreed to become the junior partners in a Liberal-led coalition government committed to waging war in Afghanistan, upholding "fiscal responsibility," and implementing the Harper government's five-year, \$50 billion-plus schedule of corporate tax cuts. Then when the Conservatives, with the backing of the most powerful sections of Canadian capital, used a patently antidemocratic mechanism—the proroguing of parliament by the unelected Governor General—to shut down parliament, the Liberals and NDP meekly relented before what was for all intents and purposes a constitutional coup.

The prospect of an election later this fall makes it impolitic, at present,

for the social democrats to emphasize their affinity with the Liberals, the Canadian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government. But in Halifax Canada's social democrats found another way of demonstrating their subservience to big business and implacable support for the existing social order. The NDP leadership was at pains to identify itself with the US Democratic Party and the Obama administration, no matter that in the seven short months Obama has held office he has proven himself to be a ruthless defender of US imperialism, plundering the state treasury for the benefit of the financial plutocracy, intensifying and extending the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, imposing draconian concessions on auto workers, and continuing, with only cosmetic changes, the wantonly antidemocratic practices of the Bush administration, including rendition and military tribunals.

While Doer was a keynote speaker in Halifax, the NDP gave top billing to Betsy Myers, a former assistant to US President Bill Clinton and the Chief Operations Officer of Obama's presidential campaign. A second keynote address was given by Marshall Ganz, a Harvard University professor and advisor to the Obama campaign.

Determined to eschew any association, however tenuous, with the notion that the NDP is a "labour party," is the political representative of the working class, a powerful section of the NDP leadership helped instigate and drummed up support for several local constituency resolutions that proposed that the NDP rename itself the Democratic Party.

"The name change resolution," explained Ian Capstick, a former aide to party leader Jack Layton, "was a very subtle and soft way of saying, 'We're here. We are a bigger party, we're more fiscally conservative than some of our predecessors, we're more responsible than a good number of them are, because we recognize that we can't promise the sun and the moon and the stars and the sky'."

In the end, the move to rename the NDP did not make it to the convention floor, in part because so much of the convention's time had been given over to discussing the "winning strategies" pursued by Doer and the Manitoba NDP, the NDP in Nova Scotia (which won election earlier this year by adopting policy planks that in some respects were to the right of the Liberals), and the US Democrats. But supporters of the name change, including Windsor MP Brian Masse and Ottawa MP Paul Dewar, have vowed that they will not let the issue die.

Layton has been seeking to rebrand the NDP as the party of "progressives," appealing during the last election to "progressives" in "all parties"—i.e. the Liberals and Conservatives—to join the NDP, and has championed the claim that the NDP and the Democrats spring from the same political family.

There is little doubt he supported the name-change initiative. Publicly, however, Layton left it to others to promote the idea, preferring to put his weight behind a resolution that would have committed the NDP to eliminating the corporate income tax on small businesses.

That resolution also failed to come before the convention for a vote, but Layton immediately announced he will press to have it made party policy through the NDP's federal council.

Also of note was the 20-page policy resolution presented to the convention by the NDP leadership. It began with the claim that "governments across Canada and around the world are quickly embracing social democratic initiatives" to counteract the economic downturn. In fact through "government intervention," the likes of Britain's Gordon Brown, Obama, and Harper have come to the rescue of the financial oligarchy, while moving to impose the burden of the economic crisis on the working class.

The NDP's policy document echoes the Conservative government's call for asserting the Canadian ruling elite's control over the Arctic through the deployment of military forces. It trumpets balanced budgets and the need to pay down the federal debt and promotes reactionary

economic nationalism, advocating "Buy Canadian," support for "Canadian ownership"—i.e. the defence of corporations owned by Canada's capitalists—and institutionalized tripartite (union, industry, government) collaboration.

Despite several pages devoted to foreign policy and Canada's place in the world, the policy document makes no reference whatsoever to Afghanistan and Canada's leading role in the Afghan counterinsurgency war.

In August 2006, as antiwar sentiment swelled across Canada and in response to the passing of a similar resolution by the Greens, the NDP abandoned its previous steadfast support for Canada's leading role in the Afghan war, adopting a resolution that called for the immediate withdrawal of the 2,000 Canadian troops deployed in southern Afghanistan.

The NDP leadership was always uncomfortable with this position. It stressed that any pullout would be done in consultation with NATO and in such a way as to not damage the war effort. During the 2008 election campaign, the NDP made virtually no reference to the war—although the Conservatives have touted Canada's military intervention in Afghanistan as a pivotal expression of their new "muscular" Canadian foreign policy. Then in their coalition deal with the Liberals, the social democrats announced their readiness to serve in a government committed to waging war in Afghanistan through 2011. Subsequently, Layton issued an "open letter" to Obama touting his "rethink" of US policy in Afghanistan—that is, his dispatch of tens of thousands of more troops and expansion of the war into Pakistan—and offering him Canada's continued support in stabilizing Afghanistan.

Layton and company may soon be pointing to the speeches of Ambassador Doer in justifying their support for increased Canadian involvement in Afghanistan.

In any event, Doer's readiness to serve as a quasi-minister in the Harper government, like the recent NDP convention in Halifax, underscores that Canada's social democrats will serve as the Canadian bourgeoisie's henchmen as it seeks to make the working class pay for the capitalist crisis through savage austerity and imperialist war.



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