Canada: NDP leader Layton concedes he has no substantive differences with big business Liberals

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New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton, in an interview aired Monday evening with Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) anchor Peter Mansbridge, was unable to point to any major policy differences between his social democratic party and the Liberals.

Canadian big business' preferred party of government during the twentieth century, the Liberals mounted an all-out assault on the working class when they last formed the government (1993-2006). This included: imposing unprecedented cuts to health care, jobless benefits, post-secondary education, social housing, and welfare; slashing taxes for big business and the rich; and, following the 1999 NATO war against Yugoslavia, launching a major expansion and rearmament of the Canadian Armed Forces.

Pressed by Mansbridge a second time to differentiate the NDP's program from that of the Liberals, a flustered Layton conceded that "the major difference is that we're committing to get things done. They've (the Liberals) made commitments and turned right around and broke those commitments time and time again. That's the major difference."

There are indeed numerous similarities between the NDP platform for the May 2 federal election and the Liberals' "Red Book" of election promises. Both parties have pledged to rapidly move toward a balanced budget. Both intend to finance modest increases in social spending in a handful of areas by partially rolling back the Conservative government's cuts in the corporate tax rate. Neither is proposing to raise taxes on the rich. Yet the richest 10 percent of Canadians, and especially the top 1 percent of income-earners, have appropriated the lion's share of real income gains over the past three decades and have done so even as governments have massively reduced the rates at which their income is taxed. Both the Liberals and NDP intend to maintain military spending at the current level, which is the highest in real (i.e. inflation adjusted) terms that it has been since the Second World War. (See: NDP platform mimics Liberal "Red Book")

For those who are familiar with the political record of the trade union-backed NDP, the admission that Layton's party has no major policy disputes with the Liberals should come as no surprise.

The NDP's pursuit of a coalition with the Liberals

Under Layton, the NDP has aggressively oriented toward gaining a share of power by aligning with the rightwing Liberals. One year after becoming federal NDP leader, Layton set up a committee of NDP "wise men" to consider how and under what conditions the NDP should advocate and enter into a governmental coalition.

In 2005, the NDP propped up the Martin Liberal government and claimed that the meager budgetary concessions they extracted from the Liberals in return—a temporary dropping of a corporate tax budget and some minor spending increases—warranted the 2005 budget being considered "the first-ever NDP budget."

Layton had prepared a letter to send to the then Liberal leader Stephane Dion on the night of the October 15 2008 federal election, proposing that the two parties forge a coalition to replace the Conservative government of Stephen Harper. But the letter was not sent because the Liberals suffered an electoral debacle, winning their smallest ever share of the national popular vote.

Six weeks later, following the Conservatives' tabling of an austerity mini-budget, Layton spearheaded a drive to replace Stephen Harper's minority government with a Liberal-led coalition. He initiated the coalition talks and acted as a go-between in the negotiations between the Liberals and the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Quebecois.

In Dec. 2008, the NDP readily agreed to serve as a junior partner in a Liberal-led coalition government committed to a rightwing agenda with "fiscal responsibility" as its first principle and including implementation of the Conservatives' plan to reduce the corporate tax rate in stages to 15 percent and Canada continuing to play a leading role in the Afghan War.

Even after the Liberals, in response to the bourgeoisie's opposition to the coalition deal and its strong support for Harper's use of the arbitrary powers of the unelected Governor-General to shut down parliament so as to prevent a non-confidence vote, replaced Dion with the "coalition skeptic" Michael Ignatieff, Layton and the NDP clung to their abortive coalition deal.

And while Ignatieff's continuing opposition to a coalition has undercut the NDP's pursuit of a coalition, it has placed its readiness to ally with the Liberals at the center of its current election campaign. The NDP platform baldly declares, "If the mandate we receive justifies it, we will work with other federalist parties, through informal or appropriate stable arrangements."

Pursuit of a partnership with the Liberals has not stopped Layton and the NDP at various times from working with the Conservatives, in opposition and government. Some nine months after the NDP's abortive coalition deal with the Liberals, the social democrats provided the Harper government with the votes it needed to remain in office.

In the weeks prior to the dropping of the current election writ, the NDP, with the full support of the Canadian Labour Congress, again offered to back Harper's budget and sustain the Conservative government—arguably the most right-wing federal government since the Great Depression—in office. In exchange, Layton unsuccessfully lobbied for a series of modest social spending increases, abandoning in the process his oft-stated

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opposition to corporate tax cuts. Only when Harper rejected Layton's blandishments did the NDP join with the Liberals and the Bloc Quebecois to bring down the Conservative government.

Stung by big business' opposition to its 2008 coalition deal with the Liberals, the NDP has been at pains to demonstrate to the bourgeoisie—by way of its willingness to collaborate with and sustain the Conservatives in office—that it is a responsible party that can and should be trusted with a place in government.

With the full support of the union bureaucracy, the NDP long ago abandoned any reference, no matter how hollow or ritualistic, to socialism and makes only the most oblique and tenuous claim to be a party of the working class.

Under Layton's stewardship, the NDP has gone a step further, with the party leadership more and more presenting the party as a Canadian version of the US Democratic Party. In keeping with this orientation, a section of the NDP leadership sought to have the NDP change its name to the Democrats at the party convention that followed Obama's election to the US presidency in 2008. And Layton now touts the NDP as a party of "progressives," a label that as the NDP leader has himself made clear is aimed at rallying dissident Liberals and Progressive Conservatives.

The record of the NDP provincial governments

The unquestioning allegiance of the NDP to the needs of big business has not been confined to recent parliamentary maneuvers in the series of minority governments that have sat in Ottawa over the past seven years. In his television interviews and stump speeches across the country, Layton has frequently bragged that NDP provincial governments, whenever they have held political power, have delivered "responsible government"–that is to say, they have balanced budgets by slashing social spending at the behest of the Bay Street financiers.

In his interview with the CBC's Mansbridge, Layton said the difference between his party and the Liberals is simply that his rivals have been in government. "They were [in power], and they broke their promises," Layton said. "We have yet to be in power. We're making some commitments, and we've got a strong record of delivering on what we say we're going to do in minority parliaments. And now we'd like the opportunity to do it as the leader of the governing party."

A quick survey of the record of the NDP provincial governments demonstrates that Canada's social democrats are completely beholden to big business and when in office rapidly renounce their reform promises.

NDP governments in British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Manitoba played a crucial role in policing Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's mid-1970s wage controls, which began the ruling class counter-offensive against the working class.

In the early 1990s, under conditions of the worst slump in Canada since the Great Depression, working people brought the NDP to power in Ontario for the first time ever, and returned it to power in British Columbia and Saskatchewan—provinces representing more than half the country's entire population. Their hopes that the NDP would protect them from the slump were quickly dashed. The NDP governments imposed massive public and social spending cuts, as well as wage austerity, and parroted the rhetoric of the right on everything from welfare reform to anti-labour laws.

In Ontario, the NDP government of Bob Rae (now a frontbencher for the Liberal Party) attacked public sector workers, ripped up union contracts, reneged on public auto insurance and was responsible for brutal social spending cuts. In 1995, discredited by their assault on the working class, the Rae NDP gave way to, and was itself responsible for, the coming to power of the Conservative regime of Mike Harris. Then, in 1996 when a series of rotating regional general strikes occurred, the trade union apparatus, backed by the NDP, torpedoed the movement. The result was the same in the fall of 1997 when a strike by the province's public and high school teachers became the focal point of mass opposition to the Conservative government.

In British Columbia, the 1991-2001 NDP government paved the way for the coming to power of the ultra-right wing Gordon Campbell Liberals, by accommodating itself ever more completely to the demands of big business. Under premiers Mike Harcourt, Glen Clark, and finally Ujjal Dosanjh, the NDP imposed budget and public sector wage austerity, used legislation to break strikes, imposed new restrictions on the teachers' right to strike, and embraced workfare and the "law and order" rhetoric of the right.

Not surprisingly, key NDP leaders have had no difficulty transitioning to the higher echelons of the Liberal Party and the corporate world. Glen Clark managed to land solidly on his feet after being forced from office in BC and today holds an executive vice president's position in billionaire Jim Pattison's sprawling business empire. And Bob Rae is far from the only NDP "star" to pop up on the front benches of the federal Liberals. Former British Columbia NDP Premier Ujjal Dosanjh has sat in Paul Martin's cabinet and has served in opposition as the Liberal health, defense and foreign affairs critic. Former IWA-Canada President Dave Haggard ran for the Liberals in the 2004 election and former Saskatchewan NDP cabinet minister Joan Beatty did the same in 2008.

Such are the practical and philosophical similarities between the two parties that this political careerism has become a two-way street with the recent collapse of Liberal fortunes. Thomas Mulcair, a cabinet minister in Quebec Premier Jean Charest's Liberal government, was actively recruited by Layton in an effort to get a foothold in Canada's sole majority-francophone province. Immediately after Mulcair's election to parliament, Layton crowned the freshly minted convert as the NDP's deputy leader and finance critic. He is currently being touted as a possible NDP leader when Layton ultimately retires. Another hefty promotion onto the front-benches apparently awaits Francoise Boivin, a Liberal MP from 2004-6, who is currently the NDP candidate in the riding of Gatineau, Quebec.

In 2007 when Layton called his officials together in Winnipeg, Manitoba, to prepare the party's election strategy, he took time to praise the local provincial NDP government of Premier Gary Doer. Doer, who had engineered three majority election victories, proudly considers himself a "small l" liberal. His government's cozy relationship with the "mega-barn" hog factories and meat-packing companies in the province was so egregious that it was criticized even within social democratic circles.

During his tenure, Doer provided more than a billion dollars in tax cuts that were heavily weighted to favour the wealthiest sections of the population, launched a program of corporate tax cuts aimed at making the corporate tax rate lowest in Canada, weakened environmental regulations, and oversaw an alarming increase in poverty.

Said Layton at his party's conclave, "We've all been really impressed by the government of Gary Doer." Apparently so was Stephen Harper. In 2009, the Conservative government appointed Doer as the Canadian Ambassador to the United States.

In Nova Scotia, an NDP majority government under Premier Darrell Dexter was elected in 2009 with open support from sections of business. Dexter, a self-confessed "conservative progressive" who enthusiastically propped up the provincial Conservative government of John Hamm for three years, ran a campaign that was to the right of the Liberal Party on economic and environmental issues. Dexter jettisoned a public auto insurance option from his party's platform, renounced a longstanding NDP commitment to repeal legislation designed to thwart union

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organizing at the province's Michelin plants, hiked university tuition fees, and heralded the NDP as the most willing of all the parties to cut spending.

Dexter has brought down budgets that have cut education and health care expenditures and increased the regressive and hated HST consumer tax by 2 percent. Dexter's government was favorably compared by the *Globe and Mail* to that of the "moderate" Doer in Manitoba for avidly pursuing policies indistinguishable from the big business Liberal Party.

At the height of the post-World War Two boom, Liberal Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent described Canada's social-democrats as Liberals "in a hurry." More than half a century later, Layton concedes that there are no substantive policy differences between the two parties and this under conditions where the Liberal Party has moved massively to the right. Like the Liberals, Canada's social democrats and trade union bureaucrats have repudiated any program of serious social reform and have become an integral part of the political establishment committed to presiding over and enforcing ever-increasing economic insecurity and social inequality.

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