

Canadian Elections:

“Surge” in support for social-democratic NDP changes campaign dynamic

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28 April 2011

According to a spate of opinion polls, support for Canada’s social-democratic party has surged during the past two weeks and the New Democratic Party (NDP) is now poised to win a more than 25 percent share of the popular vote and possibly displace the Liberals as the second largest party in parliament. Canadians are to vote in their fourth federal election in six years on Monday, May 2.

The NDP has never won as much as 20 percent of the popular vote in a national election. In the October 2008 election the NDP garnered 18.2 percent of the vote, capturing 37 of the 308 House of Commons seats.

Polls now show the NDP firmly in second place in terms of voter preference, ahead of the Liberals. The Canadian ruling class’ preferred party of government during the last century, the Liberals are currently polling significantly below the 26 percent share of the vote they took in the last election, which was their worst-ever result.

Some opinion surveys give the NDP as much as 30 percent support nationally, double its support in the first weeks of the campaign.

What makes the apparent surge in NDP support all the more remarkable is that it began with and is concentrated in Quebec, the country’s only majority French-speaking province and traditionally an electoral wasteland for Canada’s social democrats. According to the polls, the NDP is now the preferred party of more than 35 percent of Quebecers and has displaced the Bloc Québécois (BQ)—the Quebec nationalist and sovereignist party that went into the election holding 47 of the province’s 75 seats—as the most popular party in Quebec.

While the NDP has at one time or another formed the government in Ontario, Nova Scotia, and three of the four western provinces, it has never been a significant political force in Quebec. It has never elected a deputy to Quebec’s National Assembly and has only twice elected MPs from Quebec.

Elsewhere in Canada, the union bureaucracy provides the NDP with significant financial and organizational support. But in Quebec the unions have for decades aligned themselves with the pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois (PQ) and its federal sister party, the Bloc Québécois. This remains true. A special meeting of the General Council of the 600,000-member *Fédération des Travailleurs et Travailleuses du Québec* (FTQ) voted overwhelmingly April 11 to endorse the BQ and mobilize the FTQ apparatus behind its campaign.

In an effort to gain a foot-hold in Quebec, the NDP leadership has hyped the recent electoral successes of Thomas Mulcair, making him one of the party’s two deputy leaders and touting him as a possible successor to the current federal leader, Jack Layton. A former Liberal provincial cabinet minister, Mulcair won a 2007 by-election in a Montreal riding running for the NDP and was re-elected in the 2008 general election.

The NDP leadership, however, is as surprised as anyone at the sudden groundswell of support for their party in Quebec. All but a handful of their

Quebec candidates are political novices and/or unknowns. In most of Quebec’s 75 ridings, the party doesn’t even have a campaign office.

Whether the increased support for the NDP registered by the pollsters will translate into a jump in its vote on May 2, let alone produce a major increase in its representation in parliament, remains to be seen.

Voter turnout in the last federal election was a record-low 59.1 percent. Younger voters traditionally the least likely to vote, are, according to the opinion surveys, those most supportive of the NDP.

Nonetheless, it is not too soon to draw certain conclusions.

The sudden increase in support for the NDP in Quebec is a product of widespread hostility to the right wing Harper Conservative government—which is popularly identified with the Bay Street banks and the oil barons of Alberta, the promotion of militarism, and social conservatism—and of mounting disaffection with the traditional political establishment in the province, federalist and sovereignist.

The federal Liberal Party, now led by the Iraq and Afghan war-enthusiast Michael Ignatieff, is a separate organization from the Quebec Liberal Party, which currently forms the provincial government. But there is much overlap between the two parties in terms of personnel and politics and they are rightly popularly perceived as political siblings.

The eight year-old Quebec Liberal government of Jean Charest has long been emitting a fin de régime stench. Its popular support plunged after a series of scandals and its tabling, this March and last, of austerity budgets that slash social spending while increasing university tuition, electricity rates and a host of charges and consumption taxes.

Much of the increased support for the NDP has come at the expense of the BQ. The BQ postures as a progressive, worker-friendly party. But it has repeatedly made deals to prop up the minority Conservative government, enthusiastically supported till 2009 the Canadian military intervention in Afghanistan, and like the NDP was ready in December 2008 to support a Liberal-led coalition government committed to waging the war through 2011. Last but not least, the BQ is the junior sister of the PQ. The alternate provincial party of government of the Quebec bourgeoisie, the PQ imposed massive social spending cuts, while slashing taxes for big business and the rich, when it last formed Quebec’s government (1994-2003).

Bolstered by the union bureaucracy’s fulsome support, the PQ-BQ could long count on winning predominantly French-speaking working-class electoral districts by large pluralities. But the PQ lost half a million votes in the 2003 election and between April 2007 and December 2008 was reduced to third party status in the National Assembly.

In the past three elections the BQ has maintained its status as the party with the bulk of Quebec’s seats by casting itself as the party best able to prevent Harper and his Conservatives from getting a parliamentary majority. But its share of Quebec’s popular vote has steadily declined,

from 49 percent in 2004 to 38 percent in 2008. Now its support appears to be hemorrhaging. Polls give the BQ the support of little more than a quarter of the Quebec electorate.

Some analysts have compared the sudden rise in NDP support to that of the Action-Démocratique du Québec (ADQ) during the 2007 Quebec election campaign. Overnight the ADQ went from being a marginal player to the official opposition.

There are some important differences. The ADQ is a right wing populist party which abetted by sections of the corporate media gained traction by stoking animosity toward immigrants and religious minorities. But as in 2007, many Quebecers are rallying behind a hitherto marginal party so as to voice their anger with the traditional political establishment. In the case of the ADQ, its support collapsed once Quebecers learned about the right wing program of social spending cuts, privatization and social conservatism it promotes.

The past decade in Quebec has been punctuated by sudden eruptions of mass protests—in 2003 against the Iraq War, in December 2003 against the first wave of regressive measures taken by the Charest government, and the 2005 student strike. But these struggles have been systematically betrayed and suppressed by the unions. As a result, the social anger and the potential for radical change in the interests of working people have found only distorted and perverted political expression.

Significantly, the surge in support for the NDP in Quebec appears to have found no more than a faint echo in Ontario, although it is the region of the country most adversely impacted by the financial crisis and economic slump and home to the most powerful battalions of the working class.

In Ontario the NDP is identified with the conservative trade union apparatus and its imposition of wage cuts and concessions, including at the Detroit Three auto makers. Moreover, working people in Ontario have the bitter experience of electing a provincial NDP government in 1990 in the hope that it would shield them from a deepening slump, only to have the social democrats shred their promises of reform and impose social spending cuts and a wage and job-cutting “Social Contract” on one million public sector workers.

The growth in the support for the NDP in Quebec and nationally has caused the other big business parties to sharpen their attacks on it, underlining in the process just how right wing they all are.

Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff, who ignored the NDP during the first part of the campaign as part of his strategy of presenting the Liberals as the only governmental alternative to the Conservatives, is now attacking the NDP at every turn as irresponsibly left wing. On Tuesday, Ignatieff denounced the NDP as “a bunch of Boy Scouts” for calling for the withdrawal of all Canadian troops from Afghanistan.

Yesterday, two former NDP provincial premiers who are now Liberal frontbenchers, Ontario’s Bob Rae and British Columbia’s Ujjal Dosanjh, issued a statement denouncing the NDP platform as “a series of sweeping promises that do not reflect any sense of what it actually takes to govern,” and “what will make for a productive, sustainable economy.”

In fact the NDP platform proposes only small targeted social spending increases, pledges to rapidly balance the budget, would perpetuate most of Harper’s corporate tax cuts and all the reductions that recent Liberal and Conservative government have made in the taxes of the rich, and leaves in place record-high military spending.

To sharply draw the contrast between the “fiscally irresponsible” NDP and his Liberals, Ignatieff has conscripted former Liberal Prime Ministers Jean Chretien and Paul Martin to campaign with him. Between 1993 and 2004, the tandem of Chretien and Martin presided over the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history while radically redesigning the tax system in favor of big business and the rich.

The BQ, for its part, is amplifying its ethno-nationalist appeals,

denouncing the NDP as part of a reputed anti-Quebec coalition and claiming that only the BQ will put the interests of Quebecers, by which it means the interests of the Quebec elite, first.

As part of his attack on the NDP, BQ leader Gilles Duceppe has noted that the social democrats supported the Clarity Bill, a reactionary law that threatens Quebec with partition should it ever vote to secede from Canada.

Harper, meanwhile, is continuing to claim that anything but the election of a majority Conservative government will put Canada’s economic recovery at risk. Harper’s claims that Canada is doing economically well under conditions where more than 1.5 million are officially unemployed and the real incomes of working people have stagnated for three decades starkly underlines for whom he speaks.

None of the parties, including the NDP, have challenged Harper on this or made anything but the most muted criticism of the rampant growth of social inequality and poverty and the economic insecurity that haunts wide swathes of the population. This only goes to show that the real coalition in Canadian politics is that of all four big business parties against the working class—English-speaking, Quebecois and immigrant.

Predictably, the NDP has responded to the new attention being paid it, by shifting still further right. NDP leader Jack Layton has answered the attacks on the NDP’s platform by insisting that his party would if needed delay implementing its spending promises so as to ensure that the budget is balanced within four years. And, as he has done in the past, Layton has pointed to the current NDP governments in Manitoba and Nova Scotia—governments that have been lauded by the big business *Globe and Mail* and other ruling class mouthpieces for their right wing policies—as his models.

To be sure there are arch-reactionaries at the *National Post* and the *Sun* tabloids who are frothing at the mouth over the increased support for the “socialist” NDP and accusing the social democrats of inciting class war for having the temerity to suggest working people are struggling. But the more perceptive media commentators are well aware that in the NDP the Canadian bourgeoisie has a pliant tool that, like its allies in the unions, can be relied upon to channel discontent into safe channels, suppress the class struggle, and facilitate, as it did in the case of the Afghan and Libyan Wars, the deployment of the Canadian Armed Forces in imperialist war.

In a column Wednesday, the *Globe and Mail*’s senior political columnist Jeffrey Simpson conceded that the policy differences that separate the NDP and Liberals from the Conservatives are minor: “In this campaign, amid all the venomous attack ads and excessive rhetoric you can hear the silence of agreement. Most of the agreeing is on Stephen Harper’s terms ... [T]he squabbling over taxes and revenues are really at the margin of what Ottawa spends and raises in a given year.”

Writing the day before in the *Toronto Star*, former *Globe* editor Edward Greenspon contrasted the supposed radicalism of the milquetoast reformist NDP of three decades ago with the NDP of today. “In recent years,” declared Greenspon, “the NDP has repositioned itself from a party of principle to one of pragmatism, turning itself into a less admirable but more able political entity. The NDP plays the spin and news cycles as well as the so-called old-line parties. ...

“Nor is it particularly socialist. These new New Democrats forswear deficits (at least rhetorically); trumpet tax cuts for the petit bourgeoisie and talk tough on crime. Twenty years on, Tony Blair’s Third Way has finally arrived in Ottawa.”

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