

# Canada's NDP stampedes to the right

Keith Jones  
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Having been catapulted into the role of Official Opposition, the trade union-based New Democratic Party (NDP) is now seeking to convince the Canadian ruling class that it can be trusted to rule on their behalf, supplanting the Liberal Party as the bourgeoisie's "left" party of government.

Toward this end, the NDP leadership has moved sharply to the right in the seven short weeks since it recorded far and away its best-ever electoral result.

To say this is to say a lot. Canada's social-democrats abandoned any commitment to significant social reform decades ago and have implemented capitalist austerity whenever and wherever they have formed provincial governments during the past two decades.

In December 2008, the NDP, with the enthusiastic support of the Canadian Labour Congress and the entire trade union bureaucracy, agreed to serve as the junior partner of a Liberal-led federal coalition government pledged to making "fiscal responsibility" its first principle, waging war in Afghanistan through the summer of 2011, and further reducing corporate taxes.

The program the NDP presented for the May 2 general election was, as even many bourgeois commentators noted, little different from that of the Liberals. It accepted the rightwing fiscal framework established by recent Liberal and Conservative governments. It committed the NDP to rapidly balancing the federal budget and largely through social spending cuts, to maintaining all the reductions made to the taxation rates of the rich over the past decade, and to keeping corporate tax rates far below what they were even five years ago. The NDP also promised that if it formed the government, Canada would continue to spend more on the military in real—that is inflation-adjusted terms—than any time since World War II.

Having undeservedly gained new political clout as a result of the popular anger with the traditional governing parties of big business, the NDP leadership is more than ever seeking to demonstrate its "moderation" and "responsibility"—code words for acting cynically and callously to defend the interests of Canadian big business and for smothering and suppressing working class dissent.

Writing in the *Globe and Mail* just a few days before he was elected as president of the federal NDP, Brian Topp bluntly declared that the NDP must "earn ... a governing mandate" by striking "careful balances" between "change" and "prudence and responsibility" and must do this "whether the voices of the past like it or not."

Among the many rightwing gestures and actions taken by the NDP since May 2, the most important to date was the fulsome support the NDP has given for Canada's leading role in the imperialist assault on Libya. On June 14 the NDP unanimously endorsed a government motion extending support for the Canadian Armed Forces' participation in the Libyan war till mid-September.

In a charade whose cynicism was much commented on in the capitalist media, the NDP claimed to have secured, in exchange for its

support, a government commitment to forswear regime change and limit the mission to protecting civilian life. But in the debate on the motion, Defence Minister Peter MacKay and other government spokesman made no effort to hide the fact that Canada and NATO will not relent in their military assault till Gaddafi is overthrown. Moreover, the NDP itself publicly backed regime change by endorsing the Conservatives' decision to recognize the pro-imperialist Transnational Libyan Council as Libya's legitimate government.

Commenting on the NDP's willingness to support NATO's war on Libya and brazenly lie about the war's purpose, rightwing *National Post* columnist John Ivison quipped "the NDP ... weren't kidding when they promised to change Ottawa"—"this is a party that wants to present itself as a government in waiting."

Last weekend's biennial NDP convention was meant to showcase the party as cut from the same mold as Europe's social-democratic parties, which have responded to the world capitalist crisis by placing unlimited sums at the disposition of the financial elite and imposing savage social spending cuts.

That there was no serious opposition to this perspective from the trade union functionaries, high-paid professionals, NGO leaders and other relatively affluent layers who made up the overwhelming majority of the 1,200-plus convention delegates was underscored by the 98 percent vote in favor of retaining Jack Layton as party leader.

There were however two revealing convention debates.

The first concerned a motion meant to prohibit the NDP leadership from engaging in merger talks with the Liberals or striking a no-contest election pact with them.

The NDP leadership intervened forcefully to ensure that this motion was defeated. Nova Scotia MP Peter Stoffer urged the delegates not to tie the leadership's hands. "To close the door on any discussion with Liberals in future," is, said Stoffer, a "serious mistake." He added that there are many Liberals he admires, including former federal Liberal Party leader Stéphane Dion. Dion, who attended the NDP convention as an observer, was a leading cabinet minister in the Liberal government of Jean Chretien that imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history. He himself was the author of the anti-democratic Clarity Bill, which threatens Quebec with partition in the event Canada's only majority French-speaking province votes to secede.

Northern Ontario MP Carol Hughes said that she and many of her colleagues have hired former Liberal operative to staff their offices: "Instead of pushing them away, let's welcome them with open hands and open arms."

Although party president Topp didn't speak in the debate on this motion, he had made clear the position of the party leadership when he talked with reporters the previous day. "We must never close doors," said Topp. "We are ready to work with others and we will see what will be appropriate in a new hypothetical parliament in four

years after another federal election.”

In the spring of 2010, there were secret exploratory discussions about a possible merger between the NDP and the Liberals, the Canadian bourgeoisie’s preferred party of government during most of the 20th Century. NDP elder statesman Ed Broadbent and former Liberal Prime Minister Chretien were reportedly prime movers of these discussions.

Given the recent radical change in the parties’ respective parliamentary positions, there is currently little enthusiasm within either party for merger talks.

The real significance of the NDP leadership’s successful campaign to squash the motion is that it wants to keep all options open as regards its future relations with the Liberals.

Layton has frequently spoken of the need to rally “progressives” from all parties, including the Conservatives, and has incorporated several prominent ex-Liberal politicians into the NDP leadership. The most important of these is Thomas Mulcair, who served in the cabinet of the rightwing Quebec Liberal government of Jean Charest, and is now the federal NDP’s deputy leader and the party’s “Quebec lieutenant.”

The second significant debate concerned the party leadership’s bid to rewrite the preamble to the NDP constitution, so as to expunge the word “socialism” and eliminate references to “economic and social planning” and to the NDP’s support for economic life being “directed to meeting the social and individual needs of people ... not to the making of profit.”

The Conservatives and the right in general made an issue of the preamble in the last weeks of the federal election campaign when it became apparent that there was an unprecedented surge in support of the NDP. They held up the preamble as proof the NDP is a “radical party.”

The NDP leadership argued—for once truthfully—that the preamble was a relic of a bygone era and has nothing remotely to do with the policies advocated by the NDP for well over a quarter century.

Acting on a decision taken at the 2009 party convention and invoking the fact that this year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the NDP’s founding, the leadership proclaimed it time to “modernize” the preamble. In particular, the leadership wanted to substitute “social democratic” for “socialist” so as to even more clearly identify the NDP with the rightwing state parties of Europe that function under that label and to eliminate anything that could suggest the NDP is opposed to the capitalist market and private profit.

Acknowledging, albeit obliquely, the NDP’s shift to the right and repudiation of even a serious program of social reform, NDP National Director said, “You look at the language in the campaign of 2011, it was much different from the campaign of 1962.” Changing the preamble is “important because this is the articulation of who we are as a party.”

Ultimately, however, party president Topp intervened to have the motion referred back to the executive with a view to having the preamble rewritten at the next convention. His intervention was occasioned by fear that the motion to change the preamble might not secure the two-thirds majority support required when amending the party constitution.

Later, party leader Layton dismissed the issue of the preamble as one of semantics, adding, “there’s no particular rush.”

Opposition to the change was led by a petty bourgeois layer whose origins lie in the student protest movement of the 1960s and that has since moved sharply to the right. This layer upholds the political

authority of the unions and NDP, claiming that they can be pressured into fighting big business even as these organizations ruthlessly impose the demands of capital and callously betray the working class.

Barry Weisleder, the head of the misnamed Socialist Caucus and a Pabloite opponent of Trotskyism, told the convention, “You can take socialism out of the preamble, but you can’t take socialism out of the NDP.” In so doing, Weisleder made clear that the Socialist Caucus is determined to continue providing the NDP leadership with a “left” fig-leaf even as it affirms its support for austerity and imperialist war and goes to extraordinary lengths to convince the bourgeoisie that the NDP can be relied upon to administer its affairs as Canada’s government.

The elementary truth is the NDP was never a socialist party. From its very beginnings, it was a vehicle of the trade union bureaucracy and sections of small business and the middle class for pressuring big business and in particular the Liberal Party for reforms and for controlling the working class. It employed vague socialist rhetoric to tie the working class to a nationalist reformist program predicated on subservience to the capitalist rule, while ruthlessly fighting to stamp out the influence of revolutionary Marxism. In the 1970s, when Canada was convulsed by social struggles, the NDP came into open conflict with the working class, policing Trudeau’s wage controls in those provinces where it held office.

By the beginning of the 1980s, the bourgeoisie in Canada, as in all the advanced capitalist countries, repudiated once and for all the policy of social reform that it had pursued in the years of rapid economic expansion that followed World War II. The universal response of the unions and of social-democratic parties like the NDP to the bourgeoisie’s turn to class war has been to repudiate their own reformist programs and serve as instruments for the assault on the working class, dismantling public services and imposing job and wage cuts.

In Australia, Britain, France, Germany, Spain and the other countries where social-democratic parties have held national office they have served as the spearheads of the bourgeoisie’s offensive against the working class, often imposing wage-cutting “social contracts,” social spending cuts, and privatization plans more sweeping than those implemented by the traditional rightwing parties.

Workers in Canada, like their counterparts all over the world, will only be able to mount an independent political offensive in defence of their social and democratic rights by rebelling against the social-democrats and the unions and building new organizations of revolutionary struggle in opposition to them.



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