

Canada: NDP leadership campaign begins

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Brian Topp, the president of the New Democratic Party (NDP), has become the first declared candidate in the race to succeed the late Jack Layton as federal NDP leader.

Topp, who became party president in June shortly after the social-democratic NDP was catapulted from fourth-place in parliament to the Official Opposition, has only had a modest public profile till now. But he was among Layton's closest and most-trusted advisers and has longstanding ties to both the party officialdom and the trade union bureaucracy.

In November-December 2008 when the NDP sought to form a coalition government with the Liberals, long Canadian big business' preferred party of government, Topp was one of the party's chief negotiators. As such, he committed the NDP to serve as junior partners in a Liberal-led coalition committed to "fiscal responsibility," implementing the Conservative government's corporate tax cut plan, and waging war in Afghanistan through 2011.

Topp was flanked at the press conference held Monday to announce his candidacy by Quebec NDP MP Françoise Boivin and by former federal NDP leader and "elder statesman" Ed Broadbent. Broadbent's presence was meant to signal that Topp's leadership bid enjoys the support of substantial sections of the party establishment.

Broadbent's endorsement of Layton in the 2002-3 NDP leadership contest is widely thought to have been pivotal to his victory. Broadbent pointed to that endorsement in his remarks at Monday's press conference, adding "I don't just pick my friends." This was a reference to his decision to support Layton, then a Toronto City Councilor, in preference to his longtime parliamentary colleague and close friend Bill Blaikie.

Broadbent, who is establishing a think-tank to provide intellectual gloss to the NDP leadership's attempt to convince Canada's corporate elite that their party can supplant the Liberals as its "left" party of government, emphasized he had given much thought to his endorsement of Topp. Whoever succeeds Layton, he noted, "could be Canada's next prime minister. ... This is the big leagues."

Boivin's prominent role at Topp's leadership launch was meant to demonstrate that he commands support in Québec. Prior to last May's election, when it captured 59 Quebec seats, the NDP, in its six decades of existence, had only ever elected two MPs from Québec. The unexpected NDP surge in Quebec—a product of popular alienation from Quebec's federalist and sovereignist (*indépendantiste*) political establishment—has transformed the party's internal dynamics. Quebecers account for less than 2 percent of the NDP membership, yet its 59 MPs from Quebec dominate the party's 102-member parliamentary caucus.

Topp's principal opponent for the NDP leadership is widely expected to be the party's House leader and unofficial Québec lieutenant Thomas Mulcair. Unlike Topp, Mulcair has spent most of his political career in the Liberal Party. He was recruited by Jack

Layton after he had a falling out with Québec Liberal Premier Jean Charest in whose cabinet he had served as environment minister from 2003 to 2006.

At Monday's press conference, Topp reiterated, as he has done repeatedly in recent weeks, that the NDP must be ready to ally and potentially form a coalition with the Liberals so as to unseat the Harper Conservative government. This is hardly surprising. Topp has written an "insider's account" of the abortive 2008 Liberal-NDP coalition in which he laments its unraveling and argues that coalitions can provide more stable government, particularly when unpopular choices must be made, because, in a first-past-the-post electoral system, they generally have polled more votes than "majority" governments.

In launching his leadership bid, Topp also stressed his participation in the right-wing Saskatchewan NDP government of Roy Romanow—a government that won plaudits from big business for its social spending cuts. Topp served as Romanow's deputy chief of staff for much of his tenure as Premier.

Topp's entry into the NDP leadership race came just three days after the party's federal council had announced a date and place for the NDP leadership convention and the rules that will govern the contest.

These were not without controversy.

Mulcair had publicly declared that he would not stand as a candidate if the leadership convention was held early in the new year, arguing that time must be given to allow the NDP to expand its membership in Québec.

At the conclusion of its deliberations Friday, the NDP federal council announced that the leadership contest will culminate with a convention in Toronto on March 24 and that all those who have signed up to join the party by February 18 will be eligible to vote.

More contentious and politically significant was the controversy over whether unions that are affiliated to the NDP should be allotted a portion of the vote as has been the case in all previous federal party leadership contests.

Mulcair was quick to voice his opposition to any formal role for the unions in choosing the party leader. "Why unions and not environmental groups?" asked the ex-Liberal Mulcair. "If [unions] want to help sell [NDP membership] cards to their members, that's fine, but I don't think there should be a reserved number of delegates for unions."

Mulcair's remarks were quickly seconded by several NDP frontbenchers, including Nova Scotia MP Peter Stoffer and Manitoba MP Pat Martin.

Topp, on the other hand, indicated, he was in favor of restoring a vote for affiliated unions. "The details of how our party's affiliates play a role in our party can always be updated and improved," said Topp, who is the executive director of the Toronto chapter of ACTRA (the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists.)

“But I flatly and emphatically reject the idea that the labour movement should be excluded from our party.”

When the NDP chose Layton as its leader in 2003, union delegates voted in a separate electoral college whose votes were weighted so as to account for a 25 percent share of the total leadership vote. However an NDP policy convention in 2006 voted to abolish separate union representation in future leadership races in favor of a uniform one-member one-vote system. This change, which had been endorsed by a joint NDP-Canadian Labour Congress task force, was justified on the grounds that it was commensurate with recent changes to the electoral financing laws that prohibit unions and corporations from funding federal political parties and candidates.

The NDP federal council had been expected to decide the issue at its meeting last Friday. Instead, the party’s executive announced Thursday that it had taken the decision and that the 2006 policy convention decision abolishing any formal union role in choosing the party leader would stand. In announcing the executive’s decision, interim party leader Nycole Turmel conceded there had been confusion over the vote issue, but insisted that 2006 convention decision was party policy.

No sooner had Turmel, herself a past president of the federal government workers’ union PSAC, announced the party executive’s ruling than several of the country’s most powerful union bureaucrats rushed to proclaim that the issue had never been in dispute.

Paul Moist, the president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the country’s largest union, called the issue a “red herring.” He told reporters “there is no issue over this question” and charged that it had been whipped up by the right-wing media with the aim of disrupting “the NDP’s historic relationship with organized labour.”

Moist criticized both Topp and Mulcair, although not by name, for having staked out opposed stands on the union vote issue, saying each had “vested interests” in taking they stand they did.

Canadian Labour Congress President Ken Georgetti for his part declared, “I want to set the record straight,” then restated the position just affirmed by the NDP executive: “The NDP’s constitution stipulates a one-member-one-vote process for choosing the leader and that vote is in no way weighted in favour of union members.”

But Moist’s and Georgetti’s statements beg the question, if the issue of the unions’ role in NDP leadership contest was a settled issue, why did the NDP executive feel it necessary to take a decision and announce it pre-emptively so as to take it out of the hands of the NDP’s federal council? Why did Topp and Mulcair feel it necessary to stake out conflicting positions? And why did Georgetti organize a special conference call with NDP-affiliated unions on Sept. 2, then refuse to be interviewed by the press on the issue for a week?

From the standpoint of the working class, whether the unions have a role in choosing the NDP leader makes not one iota of difference. The NDP is a capitalist party that long ago repudiated even a serious commitment to social reform. When in opposition it diverts, derails, and smothers the opposition of the working class and when in office it brutally imposes capitalist austerity.

The unions, no less than the social-democratic politicians of the NDP, have redefined their relationship with the working class over the past three decades, imposing wage and job cuts, integrating themselves evermore completely into corporate management, and suppressing the class struggle. The CLC, CUPE and the entire union officialdom fully-supported the NDP’s attempt to form a coalition government with the Liberals in December 2008.

That said, it undoubtedly is true that the NDP executive’s curt rejection of a formal role for the unions in choosing the federal party leader was taken with a view to appeasing the right-wing media and demonstrating to big business that the NDP recognizes that it must prove its “readiness to govern” by purging any vestiges of its reformist past.

Just as they have called on the NDP to expunge the word socialism from the preamble to its constitution although everyone knows full well that for the NDP socialism plays absolutely no role in the formulation of NDP policy, so big business pushes for the NDP to disassociate itself from the unions as a further demonstration of its reliability and pliability.

The events of the past two weeks also make clear that while there may have been some misgivings within the union bureaucracy over the loss of the unions’ role in choosing the next NDP leader, the union bureaucracy as a whole accepts and supports this decision, for their objective is the same as that of the rest of the NDP leadership: to replace the current Conservative regime with a “progressive” government, possibly through an alliance with the Liberals, five years hence.

What such a government might look like is indicated by the platform the NDP presented at the last election. It accepted the fiscal framework established by the Harper Conservative and Chretien-Martin Liberal governments—a fiscal framework designed to swell corporate profits and the incomes of the rich; pledged to maintain the current record level of military spending; and made the central plank of its “job creation” measures a tax break for small business.

For its part, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), the country’s largest industrial union, has publicly solidarized itself with NDP MP Pat Martin’s call for an alliance, if not a formal merger, between the NDP and the Liberal Party. After Martin announced that he would enter the NDP leadership race if no other candidate came forward to champion the need for the NDP to ally with the Liberals, CAW President Ken Lewenza sent Martin a letter asking for his “guidance and advice” on how such cooperation could be brought about. “The debate that might be generated as a result of your public position is one we clearly support,” declared the CAW President.

When they last held federal office, the Liberals imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, slashed the taxes of the rich, waged war in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, launched a massive rearmament program, and, in the name of the “war on terror,” overturned longstanding democratic principles, including giving a green light to Canada’s complicity in torture.



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