

Nine candidates vie to lead Canada's NDP

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10 November 2011

Nine candidates have put their names forward to replace the late Jack Layton as leader of the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) in a one member-one vote run-off election next Spring. The victorious candidate will inherit the position of Leader of the Opposition in the federal parliament from interim NDP leader Nicole Turmel.

The leadership race is being conducted as the Canadian and world economies founder in the deepest crisis of the world capitalist system since the Great Depression and the government of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper is pressing forward with a far-reaching assault on worker rights and living standards.

Having been recently catapulted into the role of Official Opposition, the trade union-based NDP and all nine of its leadership candidates are seeking to convince the Canadian ruling class that the social democrats 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 has moved sharply to the right since it recorded its best-ever electoral result in last May's federal election. 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.

The current field of leadership hopefuls is strewn with a coterie of NDP members of parliament and party officials who are doing their utmost to assure big business that any future social democratic government can be firmly relied upon to provide "prudent fiscal management" of the capitalist economy at home and loyal adherence to Canada's imperialist interests abroad. In this, they are following closely in the footsteps of deceased leader Jack Layton who backed NATO's militarist onslaught in Libya and whose campaign team contacted leading figures in the Canadian financial elite on the eve of the last election to assure them that, in the event that the party attained power, it would follow the example of previous pro-business NDP governments in Manitoba and Saskatchewan under centre-right premiers Gary Doer and Roy Romanow.

Initial analysis of potential support for the nine leadership contenders shows three tiers of candidacies. It is expected that the main struggle will be between current front-runner and former party president Brian Topp, Layton's Quebec lieutenant Thomas Mulcair, and former Canadian Auto Worker's bureaucrat Peggy Nash.

Topp, who resigned his position as party president in order to stand for the leadership is also executive director of the actors' union, ACTRA Toronto. He is the candidate of the party establishment having garnered early "golden" endorsements from party "elder statesman" Ed Broadbent, deputy leader Libby Davies, the United Steelworkers leadership and a host of party officials and members of parliament. Never having held elected office, he has only a modest public profile. 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.

Topp is considered one of the more right-wing candidates in a field of rightward lurching contenders. He has endorsed the brutal austerity measures imposed on the Greek working class by the social-democratic PASOK government in that country and was one of the party's chief negotiators in the ill-fated 2008 gambit to form a coalition government in Ottawa with the Liberal Party. As such, he committed the NDP to serve as junior partners in a Liberal-led regime committed to "fiscal responsibility," implementing the Conservative government's corporate tax cut plan, and waging war in Afghanistan through 2011.

In his leadership bid, Topp is emphasizing his participation as the deputy chief of staff in the right-wing Saskatchewan NDP government of Roy Romanow—a government that won plaudits from big business for its deep cuts to health care and education. In order to protect his left flank, Topp recently declared his support for a tepid increase in the personal income tax rate of the richest Canadians and a restoration of the corporate tax rate to the level to which Paul Martin's Liberal government had reduced it. Topp, however, was careful not to elaborate on who would qualify as a "high income earner" or how much more they would be required to pay.

One of Topp's main competitors for the leadership is Thomas Mulcair, the NDP's former House leader and pre-eminent Quebec MP. Mulcair, along with Layton, accepted many of the accolades for the party's big May 2011 electoral breakthrough in Quebec where the NDP took 59 of 75 seats. Unlike Topp, however, Mulcair has spent most of his political career in the Liberal Party. He was recruited by Jack Layton after he fell out with Québec Liberal Premier Jean Charest in whose cabinet he had served as environment minister from 2003 to 2006.

In a 2007 interview, Mulcair described himself as "above and beyond anything else ... a public administrator and manager" and boasted about the cuts he had made while serving in the Charest government: "I chaired Quebec's largest regulatory agency and reduced staff there and brought in management schemes to make things more effective...When I was minister of the environment, I reduced by 15 percent the budget of the ministry." Like Topp, Mulcair has offered up previous provincial NDP Government's in Manitoba and Saskatchewan as models for the federal party to emulate.

Mulcair, in opposition to Topp, seeks to distance the party from the trade union bureaucracy. He sees the steady decline in union influence and membership—unionization rates have fallen below 30 percent with private sector unionization at barely 16 percent of the working population—as a key "weather-vane" demographic. When the rules for the leadership race were under discussion, 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?" he asked. "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." In the event, Mulcair won his point. The NDP Executive, in a decision clearly meant to satisfy ruling class demands for the NDP to demonstrate its "independence" from the unions, proclaimed that, unlike all previous NDP leadership races, affiliated unions would not have a share of the vote.

Angling to "come up the middle" should neither front-runner garner enough votes to gain an early majority at the spring convention, Peggy Nash, an MP from Toronto's inner city riding of Parkdale-High Park, party finance critic, and a former chief negotiator with the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW), has positioned herself as the candidate of the so-called "pragmatic left" in the NDP. She is said to have gained early support from "activists," that is proponents of various strands of identity politics, environmentalists, and leaders of anti-poverty NGOs. Prior to the election of Layton as NDP leader, Nash was associated with the "New Politics Initiative", which campaigned for a "more activist" NDP, then promptly embraced Layton and his drive to make the NDP "a party of government" though alliances and ultimately a coalition with the Liberals. Typical of the "buzz" surrounding Nash's candidacy was the declaration from webzine *rabble* commentator Murray Dobbin, "Just the fact that she isn't a white male is refreshing enough."

Nash emphasizes a nebulous "fairness" in her political speeches and is always keen to make clear that the NDP can be trusted by the financial elite to manage the economy "prudently." Her supporters point to the 2005 Ford Canada agreement that Nash, as CAW chief negotiator, presided over. That agreement saw the union bureaucracy agree to the lowest wage settlement in a generation, the elimination of 1,100 jobs and concessions on work rules and conditions that paved the way for the wholesale decimation of the industry only a few years later.

Other candidates in the leadership race, also perceive themselves as a possible "compromise" selection should the convention become dead-locked. Paul Dewar, the son of long-time party stalwart Marion Dewar and the point man for the NDP's support for NATO's war on Libya and the leading role Canada played in the bombing campaign, best fits this bill.

Others have entered the race to enhance their political standing within the party or to push particular issues. Of particular note is British Columbia MP Nathan Cullen who has proposed that in ridings currently held by Harper's Conservatives, the NDP, Liberal and Green Party constituency organizations band together to jointly select one candidate to stand against the sitting Conservative, thereby avoiding "vote-splitting." Cullen, a self-proclaimed environmentalist has long had close relations with the Green Party of Elizabeth May and sections of the Liberal Party. His candidacy is backed by right-wing Manitoba MP Pat Martin who has called for the NDP to consider a merger with the Liberal Party.

Robert Chisholm, a Nova Scotia MP and former leader of the provincial party recently entered the race. He is backed by Nova Scotia NDP premier Darrell Dexter who has slashed social spending in the province and refused to amend laws that were drafted at the behest of the tire-manufacturer Michelin to impede union organization. As Chisholm does not speak French, many view his candidacy as a non-starter.

Romeo Saganash, the native Cree MP from northern Quebec and a former land-claim negotiator is the first aboriginal person to stand for the leadership of a major Canadian political party. Saganash recently

echoed demands from the dominant faction of the Canada's elite for the NDP to declare its support for the Clarity Act—antidemocratic legislation that threatens Quebec with partition in the event its votes to secede from Canada.

Other entrants into the race are 29-year-old northern Manitoba MP Niki Ashton and Halifax businessman Martin Singh.

The NDP hopes that the inclusion of nine candidates from all regions of the country will spur interest in the party and help it boost its dwindling membership rolls. Although the party more than doubled its best-ever seat total in the May 2nd election, the NDP, like the other parties in parliament, is a hollow electoral machine, supported by the media, state and establishment, but with little active support, above all in the working class. Membership figures on the eve of the leadership race show that the nation-wide the NDP has barely 86,000 members. In the province of Quebec—where the NDP won 59 seats in the last election—it lists only 1,695 members. The Atlantic Provinces, even with an NDP government in Nova Scotia, can claim little more than 4,000 members. The fourth largest province, Alberta, has 9,000 members. Saskatchewan and Manitoba, the ancestral home of the NDP and its predecessor the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, have 10,000 and 9,000 members respectively. Even in the heavily industrialized provinces of Ontario and British Columbia, where the union bureaucracy has for decades promoted the NDP, it has only 22,000 and 30,000 members respectively—almost exclusively union bureaucrats, professionals and other affluent middle-class layers.

Those who want to genuinely fight against the Harper administration and the all-out assault on living standards demanded by big business will find no home in the New Democratic Party. Everything the NDP does is driven by the determination of the trade union bureaucracy and the more privileged sections of the middle class to suppress and prevent the working class from establishing its political independence, prosecuting the class struggle, and bringing to power a workers' government committed to radically reorganizing economic life so as to make social need, not private profit, its animating principle.



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