

Canada: Front-runner for NDP leader considered joining Harper Conservatives

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15 March 2012

Canada's social-democratic party, the New Democrats or NDP, will choose a successor to the late Jack Layton as federal party leader and head of the Official Opposition on March 24. While it is impossible to say which of the seven leadership candidates will emerge victorious, the reputed front-runner is Thomas Mulcair, a former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister who has focused his campaign on the need for the NDP to lurch still further right.

According to an internal poll conducted for a rival candidate, Mulcair will garner about 25 percent of the first ballot votes in the "one member-one vote" contest, leaving him—at least temporarily—atop the pack of leadership hopefuls. Mulcair has raised more money and from a larger number of donors than all his rivals.

There has been considerable press speculation, denied by both camps, that Mulcair and fellow leadership contestant British Columbia MP Nathan Cullen have made an alliance. Cullen, who like Mulcair describes himself as a "pro-business New Democrat," has called for the Liberals, Greens, and NDP to stand joint candidates against all sitting Conservative MPs in the next federal election. Yesterday, the likely last-place finisher in the leadership race, Nova Scotia pharmacist Martin Singh, urged his supporters to vote for Mulcair on the second ballot.

Mulcair has a long and well-documented record as a big business politician. But in recent weeks a new element in his political biography has come to light that underscores not only how rightwing are Mulcair's politics, but the extent to which the NDP is a capitalist party no different from the Liberals and Conservatives. Prior to joining the NDP and being quickly promoted by Layton to the post of co-deputy party leader, Mulcair had a dalliance with the Conservative government of Stephen Harper.

Mulcair served as a Liberal member of the Quebec National Assembly for a dozen years and from 2003 to 2006 was the environment minister in the Quebec Liberal government of Jean Charest. As such, he supported changes to the Quebec labor code designed to facilitate contracting out, the imposition by government decree of wage-cutting contracts on half a million public sector workers, the ending of a freeze on university tuition hikes, and legislation that allows private for-profit health-care clinics to perform dozens of different medical procedures and operations.

In 2006 Mulcair had a falling out with Charest over the government's plans to issue development licenses in a provincial park and when Charest subsequently reshuffled his cabinet Mulcair declined appointment to a position of less importance. In early 2007, Mulcair said he was quitting provincial politics and in April of that year he announced he would be standing as a candidate for the federal NDP.

What was not previously public knowledge is that prior to negotiating his way into the NDP leadership, Mulcair held extensive discussions with representatives of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Office on joining the government.

According to Mulcair, "They offered me two senior posts, one as head of a federal agency in environment, the other as a senior advisor." But once he learned he would have to toe the government's line in attacking the Kyoto Accords (on limiting greenhouse gas emissions) and suppress his disagreements with the government on several other environmental issues, Mulcair rejected the Conservative overtures. Or so he claims.

Sources from within the Conservative Party, who admittedly have an interest in damaging Mulcair's credibility, claim that the real reason the negotiations

fell apart was that Mulcair insisted on a cabinet post as his price for helping the government burnish its environmental credentials.

Whatever the truth in all of this, Mulcair had no difficulty in transitioning from the Liberal Party, to prospective Conservative government appointee, to the NDP frontbench.

Like Harper and Bob Rae, the current interim leader of the federal Liberal Party, Mulcair is an outspoken supporter of the Israeli government's suppression of the Palestinian people and its repeated invasions of Lebanon. In 2008 he declared, "I am an ardent supporter of Israel in all situations and under all circumstances." Along with the rest of the NDP MPs, he twice voted to support Canada's leading role in the NATO war on Libya.

And in keeping with the NDP platform in the last federal election, Mulcair is opposed to raising income or capital gains taxes on even the most wealthy Canadians or to making significant cuts to Canada's military spending—which currently is the highest in real terms since World War II.

In arguing during the current leadership campaign for the NDP to move to the "center," abandon "boiler-plate slogans," and adopt an approach that "shows that we are conscious that there are limits to what government can do," Mulcair has rightly insisted that he is continuing on the path of the much venerated Layton.

It was Layton who championed a governmental coalition with the big business Liberals in 2008, repeatedly made deals to prop up the Harper government in the name of making parliament work, recruited Mulcair as part of his attempt to unite "progressives from all parties" under the NDP banner, and committed the NDP to making "fiscal responsibility" its first principle.

Although Mulcair has made no secret of his wish to loosen the NDP's ties with the trade union bureaucracy, he has garnered endorsements from a broad section of the union officialdom, including the United Food and Commercial Workers, former International Woodworkers of America head Jack Munro, and ex-Ontario Federation of Labour president Wayne Samuelson. Much of the party establishment, including former Ontario NDP leader Howard Hampton and former B.C. premier Mike Harcourt, is also in Mulcair's camp.

Mulcair's unabashed called for the NDP to align itself even more closely with big business has earned him donations from charter members of Canada's financial aristocracy. John Sherrington, the vice chairman of Scotia Capital, Anthony Munk, the director of Barrick Gold Corporation, and Gerry Schwartz, the CEO of the multi-billion dollar equity firm Onex, have all contributed to Mulcair's campaign.

In the dying weeks of the campaign, several of Mulcair's opponents—most notably Brian Topp and Peggy Nash—have sought to garner support by questioning Mulcair's NDP bona fides. But all of them are completely complicit in the headlong shift of the NDP to the right that began decades ago and accelerated under Layton.

Topp, a longtime party backroom operative, was a key advisor to Saskatchewan NDP premier Roy Romanow, whose government imposed brutal social spending cuts, and was a chief negotiator of the 2008 coalition deal with the Liberals. Last July, he voiced his support for the vicious austerity program imposed on the people of Greece by the banks and Greece's social-democratic government.

Nash, a former Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) negotiator, fully supported the CAW's alliance with Ontario Liberal premier Dalton McGuinty, as well as the abortive 2008 coalition deal with the Liberals. Her supporters point to the 2005 Ford Canada agreement that Nash, as CAW chief negotiator, presided over as testament to her "pragmatic progressive" politics. 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 CAW to join with the US, Canadian and Ontario governments in 2009 in imposing wage and benefit cuts of \$19 per hour on workers at the Detroit Three.



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