

Canada: NDP picks ex-Liberal minister as federal party leader

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Canada's social-democratic party, the New Democrats or NDP, has chosen Thomas Mulcair to succeed the late Jack Layton as federal party leader and head of the Official Opposition. A former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister, Mulcair joined the NDP just five years ago and only after giving serious consideration to an offer from Prime Minister Stephen Harper to become a senior Conservative government advisor.

During the seven-month leadership race, Mulcair portrayed himself as the candidate best able to “broaden” the NDP’s electoral support by rallying “progressives” from all parties. Although the NDP long ago shredded its reformist program, embracing “fiscal responsibility” and corporate tax cuts and supporting Canada’s participation in US-led imperialist wars, Mulcair spent much of the campaign, arguing that the NDP needs to move toward the “center” and disparaging NDP policies and rhetoric as half-century-old “boilerplate.”

While Mulcair was short on specifics, he was quick to repeat the standard capitalist media refrain that the NDP has lacked credibility on economic issues. As a Quebec Liberal cabinet minister and legislator, Mulcair supported a raft of right-wing measures, including changes to the province’s labor code that facilitate the contracting-out of jobs, legislation establishing a “right” to private for-profit health-care, and a bill imposing concession-laden contracts on a half-million public sector workers.

It took Mulcair four ballots to prevail over six rival candidates in the membership vote, but he led by a wide margin throughout the voting. On the final ballot, he had an almost 15 percentage-point margin of victory, capturing 57 percent of the vote as compared to 43 percent for former party president and long-time NDP backroom operator Brian Topp. Before the final

ballot was held, more than half of the NDP’s MPs had publicly declared their support for Mulcair,

Mulcair has made no secret of his wish to distance the NDP from the trade unions. He intervened forcefully last September to oppose a call to revive a formal role for affiliated unions in choosing the NDP leader. Nevertheless, Mulcair drew considerable support from the union bureaucracy, including official endorsements from two of the country’s largest private sector unions, the UFCW and SEIU. After former CAW official and Toronto MP Peggy Nash was forced to drop out of the balloting Saturday, Paul Moist, the president of CUPE (the Canadian Union of Public Employees), the country’s largest union, switched his allegiance to Mulcair.

A close associate of Jack Layton, second-place finisher Topp enjoyed the support of important sections of the trade union bureaucracy and NDP officialdom, including former Saskatchewan Premier Roy Romanow, whose record of social spending cuts and balanced budgets Topp has repeatedly held up as a model for the NDP. Topp was one of the architects of the abortive 2008 coalition deal under which the NDP agreed to serve as junior partner in a Liberal-led government committed to implementing the Liberal-Conservative \$50 billion corporate tax cut plan and waging war in Afghanistan through 2011.

During the leadership race, Topp proclaimed himself the champion of “traditional” NDP values and repeatedly warned that Mulcair would efface any distinction between the social democrats and the Liberals, Canadian big business’ preferred party of government during most of the twentieth century.

Just days before the conclusion of the leadership race a prominent Topp supporter, NDP elder statesman and former federal party leader Ed Broadbent, solicited

interviews with many of Canada's most important media outlets, so he could issue an unprecedented political broadside against Mulcair. While Broadbent's intervention was undoubtedly motivated by factional concerns, both he and Topp have repeatedly pointed to the significance of the Occupy movement and growing popular anger over social inequality. Moreover, Broadbent has on several occasions expressed concern that the NDP could be bypassed by a leftwing movement—that is to say that the NDP could be so identified with the establishment as to render it ineffective in carrying out its role as a political policeman of the working class on behalf of Canadian capitalism.

Although the NDP was catapulted into the position of official opposition in the last federal election, it rests on a very narrow base of active support. Just 65,000 people, barely half of the NDP's 130,000 national membership, voted to make Mulcair party leader.

While there had been speculation in the press about a bid to block a Mulcair victory, none of the other candidates rallied to Topp's support as they were eliminated from the ballot Saturday. And when Mulcair took to the stage to deliver his victory speech, Topp was predictably at his side to demonstrate his full support for the new party leader.

Significantly, the third-place finisher, British Columbia MP Nathan Cullen, made the pivot of his campaign the call for the NDP to stand joint candidates with the Liberals and Green Party in Conservative-held ridings in the next federal election. Cullen's campaign co-chair, veteran NDP organizer Jamey Heath, was quick to claim the 24 percent share of the vote that Cullen received on the third ballot was indicative of strong support within the NDP for forging a "progressive" anti-Harper coalition. "That we were not dead on arrival with this says something about the state of progressive politics," Heath told the *Toronto Star*. "What's happened here is that New Democrats are certainly open to having a respectful conversation about cooperation [with the Liberals]. People ... believe it's a conversation the party should have."

When it comes to discussing the evolution of social-democratic parties like the NDP, the terms right and left have lost much of their meaning, so far have these parties moved to the right over the past three decades. They no longer make even a pretense of representing

the working class and in Canada, as around the world, they have played a major role in dismantling the very public services and social welfare policies they once held up as proof capitalism could be humanized through parliamentary reform.

Even as NDP and union officials were gathering in Toronto for the leadership convention that accompanied the cross-Canada electronic vote, the Ontario NDP was involved in secret discussions with the Ontario Liberal government on a deal to secure passage of a provincial budget that will slash billions in social spending and impose real wage cuts on public sector workers.

That said, there is no question that the election of Mulcair represents a further shift to the right. It is a public avowal that the NDP is a big business party, akin to the Democrats in the US or Britain's new Labour Party.

While the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression and the bourgeoisie's embrace of social reaction and war is propelling the working class into convulsive social struggles, the social democrats and union bureaucrats are anxious to prove to Canada's ruling elite that they can serve as its ostensible "left" party of government, using populist phrases while ruthlessly imposing the diktats of big business.



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