

Canada: NDP suffers debacle in British Columbia election

Dylan Lubao
22 May 2013

Opinion polls and media pundits notwithstanding, the trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP) suffered a debacle in the May 14 British Columbia election, failing to unseat an unpopular twelve year-old Liberal government.

The Liberals, who have held office in Canada's third-most populous province since 2001, will use their fourth successive majority government to intensify big business' assault on the working class. Already Premier Christy Clark has said that she will renew her drive to impose a concessionary ten-year contract on the province's teachers.

For several years opinion polls had shown the NDP poised to return to power in B.C. for the first time since 2001. This trend continued right through until May 14th, although pre-election polls did indicate that the Liberals had narrowed what at the launch of the campaign had been a 20 percentage-point NDP lead.

When the votes were counted, the NDP emerged with just a 39.5 percent share of the popular vote—a 2.65 percentage point drop from the 2009 election—and with only 33 seats, three less than when the election campaign began. With 44.4 percent of the votes cast, the Liberals won 50 of the provincial legislature's 85 seats. The Green Party entered into the provincial parliament for the first time, winning a seat in an affluent south Vancouver constituency, and one seat was taken by an independent.

The most striking feature of the election results was the low voter turnout. Only 51 percent of eligible voters participated, with the total number of votes decreasing by 10,000 from 2009, when the turnout was also close to a record low. Until recently, it was common in B.C. elections for more than 70 percent of the electorate to vote.

The mass abstention in B.C.'s May 14 vote is an expression of popular disaffection with the entire political establishment, including the social-democratic NDP and the trade unions—a disaffection born of the recognition that the establishment parties are impervious to the needs of working people and when in office pursue essentially the same big business agenda. Significantly, young people were the least likely to vote, with an estimated election participation rate of

just 27 percent.

While the corporate media has trumpeted the Liberals' victory as "sweeping," they in fact polled the votes of just 23 percent of registered voters, or less than one in every four. The NDP's share was 20 percent and that of the Greens 4 percent.

The B.C. election results are a major blow to the NDP, which has responded to its surprise emergence as Canada's Official Opposition in the 2011 federal election by stepping up its efforts to convince the ruling class that it can supplant the Liberals as its "left" party of government. Toward this end, the NDP has moved still further right, championing Canada's participation in the NATO war on Libya, opposing the Quebec student strike, and sustaining in office an Ontario Liberal government that has cut billions from social spending and used anti-worker laws to impose wage cuts and other concessions on teachers.

Thomas Mulcair, the ex-Quebec Liberal cabinet minister who now heads the federal NDP, and the NDP leadership as a whole, viewed an NDP victory in the May 14 B.C. election as a vital first step for the party's 2015 national election campaign. The NDP wanted to use B.C. to showcase to the ruling class that it could provide "effective", "fiscally responsible" government—i.e. enforce austerity on the working class and swell business profits—in one of the country's major provinces.

The NDP's B.C. campaign was organized by three former top aides of the late NDP leader Jack Layton—Anne McGrath, Brian Topp, and Brad Lavigne. All three had been front in center in Layton's drive to reposition the NDP as a "moderate, progressive" party akin to Obama's Democrats and the campaign mounted by B.C. NDP leader Adrian Dix followed this prescription to the letter.

Last week's election debacle initially left the party leadership flummoxed. But as the dust settled around the wreckage of the NDP campaign, party heads were quick to declare their agreement with the corporate media's claim that the social democrats need to be even more pliant before big business. In an interview with the *Toronto Star*, Mulcair,

who had joined Dix's campaign tour for several days, lamented that Dix's deference to big-business was insufficient in the case of the Kinder Morgan oil pipeline expansion, a development proposal that Dix rejected. "There's a difference," said Mulcair, "between not saying yes in advance, and saying no."

The highlight of the NDP campaign was a set of anemic "reform" proposals. These included raising the corporate tax rate by a paltry 2 percent and a meager tax increase for the highest income bracket—which in both cases would have left the tax rates far lower than they were when the NDP last held office. By vowing not to repeat his NDP predecessors' purported mistakes of "trying to do too much", Dix emphasized that he would make only a handful of largely cosmetic changes to the socially destructive big business policies implemented by the Liberal governments of Gordon Campbell and Christy Clark.

Although B.C. has Canada's highest poverty rate, the NDP proposed only minimal increases in income support programs, such as the inflation-indexing of social assistance (welfare) benefits. It proposed no reduction whatsoever in university tuition fees, which have more than doubled in the past decade.

Dix promised generous subsidies to the film industry and despite phony pretenses, he made it clear that his party would support the liquefied natural gas industry's environmental destructive "fracking" operations.

Sections of the business elite responded favourably to these overtures. The Business Council of British Columbia proclaimed a "solid" relationship with "key figures" within the NDP, while former NDP Premier Glen Clark, now president of the multi-billion dollar Jim Pattison Group, worked the corporate corridors to emphasize that the social democrats were eager to partner with big business.

During the election campaign, the Liberals resorted to the traditional rhetoric of the political right in B.C., trying to paint the NDP as "radical," if not "socialist," and pointing to Dix's decision to reject the Kinder Morgan pipeline as proof that the NDP is "anti-business." Liberal Minister of Forests Mike de Jong, referring to a 2010 NDP report that proposed to nationalize power production, compared the NDP to the regime of the late Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. This prompted a protest from Dix, who repudiated the party's support for the power proposal, which in any case had never figured in the party's platform.

In the aftermath of the elections, Clark publicly mused about renaming her party so as to better accommodate its constituent elements—Harper Conservatives, federal Liberals, and one-time supporters of the right-wing populist Social Credit Party. Clark has indicated that she plans to aggressively develop the liquefied natural gas industry and

the Kinder Morgan oil pipeline. She has also made clear that she will be calling on the trade unions to work more closely with her government, i.e. to assist it in slashing jobs and wages. Union leaders were quick to reciprocate. B.C. Teachers' Federation President Susan Lambert expressed the hope that the invigorated Liberals will "allow a mature relationship to develop—one that's mutually respectful."

The B.C. elections were a debacle for the trade union bureaucracy, which was hoping under an NDP government to strengthen its corporatist relations with big business.

Over the past twelve years workers in B.C. have repeatedly come forward to challenge the provincial Liberal government only to have their struggles isolated and suppressed by the unions and NDP. In recent years, in the face of mounting public sector worker anger over the Liberals "zero net mandate"—under which any wage increases are paid for through speed-up and job cuts—the unions have baldly opposed any job action, claiming that things would be better when the NDP was returned to office in May 2012.

Pseudo-left organizations such as the International Socialists (IS), the Canadian organization aligned with the British SWP and the U.S. International Socialist Organization, have worked assiduously to uphold the dwindling authority of the unions and the NDP. The IS hyped the right-wing NDP campaign, publishing an editorial late last month titled "BC NDP platform: really good, but not as good as it could be." The editorial said not a word about the NDP's role in enforcing austerity and wage cuts and supporting imperialist war. It concluded by urging working people to support this big business party because "we can force an NDP government to do the right thing."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact