

Alberta's NDP pledges to “partner” with big business

Keith Jones
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Alberta's incoming New Democratic Party (NDP) government has been anxiously seeking to reassure big business that it will loyally serve their interests.

Party leader and Premier-designate Rachel Notley has been “reaching out,” to use her words, to the province's oil barons, proclaiming in both public and private that she views them as “partners.” Any changes, she insists, will be made in consultation and cooperation with them and will be predicated on the continued health—i.e. profitability—of Alberta's most important industry.

The NDP, Notley declared in an interview on Global Television's “West Block,” wants Alberta to be “a healthy place for investment.”

Speaking last Tuesday, one week to the day the NDP swept to power ending 44 years of Progressive Conservative rule over Canada's principal oil-producing province, Notley said she had had “some really good discussions” with the heads of the major oil and gas companies. She was confident, she said, “we'll be able to continue what started through those conversations. ... My guiding principle is the economic health of Alberta, job creation and maintenance, and as a result of that, the sustainability of the industry.”

Explaining Notley's actions, a leader of her transition team told the *Globe and Mail*, “We're not going to be able to impose change on the industry. We're going to have to find a meeting of minds. That is what she is saying in her phone calls to industry leaders.”

Notley has also sought to signal her rightwing intentions by boasting that she is taking counsel from former Saskatchewan NDP Premier Roy Romanow and surrounding herself with other NDP veterans. A stalwart of the most rightwing section of the NDP establishment for decades, Romanow was long courted by Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien to join his

cabinet.

Notley has named Brian Topp, a Romanow protégé, to be her chief of staff. Topp served as Romanow's deputy chief of staff from 1993-2000, as the Saskatchewan NDP government imposed sweeping social spending cuts, including closing scores of local hospitals and clinics, to balance the provincial budget

In November-December 2008, Topp played a pivotal role in the federal NDP's attempt to form a coalition government with the Liberals. As Topp detailed in his 2010 book, *How We Almost Gave the Tories the Boot (the Inside Story Behind the Coalition)*, he helped negotiate an agreement under which the NDP was to serve as the junior partner in a Liberal-led coalition government pledged to “fiscal responsibility,” implementing the Liberal-Conservative plan to slash corporate taxes by \$50 billion and waging war in Afghanistan through 2011.

Notley has also convinced Richard Dicerni to remain as the secretary to the cabinet, the top bureaucrat in Alberta's government. A senior mandarin in federal and provincial governments for decades, Dicerni was brought in by outgoing Premier Jim Prentice after he assumed the leadership of the Progressive Conservatives last September with the strong backing of Big Oil and the aim of steering Alberta's government sharply right.

Dicerni was quick to praise Notley: “She is walking the talk in regards to stability and continuity,” he declared.

The NDP was catapulted into office in the May 5 provincial election, quadrupling its share of the popular vote and raising its delegation in the 87-member Alberta legislature from 4 to 54.

It benefited from a groundswell of opposition to the Progressive Conservatives, who had responded to the

collapse in oil prices by lashing out against working people. Their March budget announced a nine percent real cut in government spending over the next three years, slashed 1,700 health care jobs, imposed premiums for public health care and raised numerous other fees and taxes—while insisting that corporate tax rates were inviolable.

Saying her party needs time to prepare its unexpected entry into government, Notley has yet to set a date for the official transfer of power.

The Premier-elect has also been loath to make any policy pronouncements. She has said that before the end of the NDP's four-year mandate, it will establish a "Resource Owners Rights Commission" to examine the royalties paid by oil and gas producers. But Notley has also pledged that there will be no royalty increases while energy prices are depressed and that it is possible the review will leave the royalties unchanged.

In 2007, the Progressive Conservative government of Ed Stelmach increased royalties, but subsequently backed off in the face of bitter opposition from energy producers. The royalty increase was an important factor in the rallying of sections of the oil industry behind the upstart Wildrose party in the 2008 and 2012 elections. Wildrose is now the Official opposition, while the Tories, with 10 seats, have been relegated to third place.

The Alberta oil barons are notorious for their ultra-rightwing views and have been a pillar of support for Stephen Harper's Conservative government. Predictably, some oil executives have responded to the prospect of an NDP government modestly raising royalties and increasing the corporate tax rate two percentage points to 12 percent (the rate in neighbouring Saskatchewan, another major oil-producing province) with reactionary rants and threats of an investment strike.

However, many others have taken the measure of the new government and announced, as Notley boasted, their readiness to work with it. Encana CEO Doug Suttles said he was confident Notley understands the importance of the energy sector and will not make precipitous changes. On Thursday, the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), the main industry lobby group, announced it was starting a committee to consult with the incoming government "on priorities to make the industry stronger."

CAPP head Tim MacMillan stressed that there were many avenues for collaboration between the government and the industry and that CAPP wants to be "a positive force" in helping "change" happen in Alberta.

Since its founding in 1961, the trade union-based NDP has been an integral part of the bourgeois political establishment, a mechanism for defusing and suppressing working class opposition. Like social democratic parties the world over, the NDP has lurched to the right over the past three decades. It has repudiated even its traditional milquetoast reform program, imposing capitalist austerity whenever it has held office and playing a major role in dismantling the social-welfare programs it once held up as proof capitalism could be humanized.

The NDP has emerged as a staunch supporter of an aggressive foreign policy, supporting Canada's participation in one imperialist war or intervention after another, including the 1999 NATO war on Yugoslavia, the Afghan war, the ouster of Haiti's elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004, and the 2011 NATO "regime change" war in Libya.

The NDP's implacable opposition to any serious mass challenge to austerity was highlighted by its attitude toward the 2012 Quebec student protests. It refused to even nominally oppose the Quebec government's Bill 78—legislation which effectively outlawed the strike and placed draconian restrictions on the right to demonstrate over any issue in Quebec.

Buoyed by this month's victory in Alberta, the NDP and their trade union backers will step up their campaign to bring to power an alternate government of austerity and war in this October's federal election. This is exemplified by their repeated calls for a coalition with the Liberals, the Canadian ruling elite's traditional alternate part of government.



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