

Canada's NDP pledges to “partner” with business as its poll numbers jump

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The New Democratic Party's (NDP's) unanticipated victory in Alberta's May 5 provincial election has contributed to a significant jump in its poll ratings nationally, triggering media speculation that the social democrats could form Canada's government following the October federal election.

Considered little more than an also-ran when the Alberta elections were called, the NDP saw its vote go up fourfold and its tally of seats in the provincial legislature rise from 4 to 54. The Progressive Conservatives, in power in Alberta since 1971, were reduced to third place, prompting the immediate withdrawal from public life of their leader, Jim Prentice, a former bank vice-chairman and leading minister in the national Conservative government.

In the intervening three and a half weeks, the NDP has been at pains to reassure big business, with the new premier, Rachel Notley, personally speaking and meeting with the province's leading oil barons.

At her first post-election press conference, Notley pledged any policy changes “will be done collaboratively and in partnership” with big oil and other big business interests, “I'm hopeful,” she added, “that over the course of the next two weeks they will come to realize that things are going to be just A-OK over here in Alberta.”

Notley has since announced that her government, which was officially sworn in only last Sunday, will wait until the fall to table its first budget. The principal purpose for the delay, as Notley has herself emphasized, is to allow for greater consultation, especially with the oil industry, which is adamantly opposed to the NDP's proposal that a consultative committee consider a modest increase in oil royalties.

On Thursday, Notley announced that her government is immediately injecting C\$103 million into the province's public schools. This fulfills an election pledge to reverse education cuts made by the previous government and to provide schools with funds to support the 12,000 additional students they are to receive next September.

Notley and her cabinet colleagues, however, are also claiming that the province's finances are in even worse shape than claimed by the previous government, which had said plummeting oil prices had eliminated C\$7 billion in annual revenue.

Speaking to reporters Wednesday after the first meeting of her new cabinet, Notley signaled that the NDP will have to revise or delay some of its pledges to reverse Conservative cuts or modestly increase social spending. “There's no question as we get briefed we are starting to find the challenges are a bit bigger than what may have been featured in the Prentice government's campaign,” said Notley.

“And, as you know,” she continued, “our plan was built off of their plan.” So, “we're going to have to adjust accordingly.”

Notley has appointed as her chief of staff Brian Topp, who cut his political teeth as a senior aide to the Saskatchewan NDP government of the 1990s, which slashed public spending and closed hospitals and health clinics to balance the province's budget.

In 2008, Topp was a leading architect of the coalition agreement between the NDP and the Liberals to oust the federal Conservative government of Stephen Harper. That agreement called for the NDP to serve as junior partners in a government committed to implement tens of billions in corporate tax cuts and wage war in Afghanistan through 2011. The emergence of such an explicitly pro-business, alternative government was averted only by Harper's anti-democratic constitutional coup, when he prevailed on the Governor General to suspend parliament.

The spike in the NDP's national poll ratings, with one survey even putting it in first place ahead of the Conservatives and Liberals with 29 percent support, is not due just to the Alberta elections. The Liberals, led by Justin Trudeau, are rightly increasingly perceived by the public as “Conservatives lite.”

Opposition to the Liberals has crystalized over their stance on the Conservative government's draconian Bill C-51. Presented as an anti-terrorist measure, the bill grants sweeping new powers to the national-security apparatus, including authorizing the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) to break virtually any law when “disrupting” groups deemed to threaten Canada's economic or national security.

While the Liberals claim to oppose many parts of Bill C-51, they have voted for it. They claim the security agencies urgently need new powers to deal with terrorism and that the problems in the legislation can be fixed later.

This reactionary and cowardly position has found little

resonance. Many recognize that the Conservatives are incessantly hyping the “terror” threat to stampede the public into accepting sweeping attacks on democratic rights and Canada’s participation in the US-led war in the Middle East. Moreover, many recall that when they last formed the government, the Liberals presided over a massive assault on basic democratic rights. This included adopting a draconian Anti-Terrorism Law, with a sweeping catch-all definition of terrorism, and authorizing the Communications Security Establishment (CSE) to systematically spy on Canadians’ electronic communications.

This has not stopped the NDP from continuing to explore the possibility of reviving the 2008 coalition after the upcoming federal election. Under the guise of doing everything to throw out the Tories, NDP leader Thomas Mulcair has repeatedly made overtures to Justin Trudeau and the Liberals, a party which implemented the largest social spending cuts in Canadian history when it last held power.

Speaking at a press conference in Montreal in March, Mulcair criticized the Liberals for their apparent unwillingness to discuss such a prospect. “Whenever we have opened that door, Justin Trudeau slams it shut.... My first priority is to get rid of Stephen Harper,” Mulcair declared.

Based on this argument, the trade unions and their pseudo-left apologists are preparing to campaign for a “strategic” vote against Conservative candidates in the fall election—that is, for Harper to be replaced by a Liberal or a Liberal-NDP coalition government.

However, the high level of opposition to both of the traditional governing parties is leading some press commentators to speculate that the surge in support for the NDP could sweep it to power in October. *Toronto Star* columnist Tim Harper claimed that recent weeks had shown Mulcair to be the true “agent of change” rather than Trudeau. “[I]t is the NDP that offers the clean break from a tired government in its 10th year,” wrote Harper. “Trudeau and his Liberals are offering tentative change, a lurch to the middle with little daylight between them and the Conservatives.”

In reality, if the NDP forms the next government, it will act to defend the interests of the Canadian capitalist class no less ruthlessly than the Conservatives or Liberals. Whenever it has held power at the provincial level, the NDP has come into headlong conflict with the working class, imposing Trudeau’s wage controls in the 1970s and over the last quarter-century actively participating in the dismantling of the public services and social-welfare measures that it once held up as proof capitalism could be “humanized.”

In an interview published last week in the Montreal daily *La Presse*, the co-president of the party’s national campaign, Alexandre Boulerice, insisted that a federal NDP government would have balanced budgets. Mulcair, for his part, has pledged that the NDP will not hike taxes on the rich and super-rich—this after Liberal and Conservative governments have lavished tax

cuts on them and the rich have for years appropriated the lion’s share of gains in real income.

The NDP’s opposition to any genuine challenge to the ruling elite’s austerity agenda was demonstrated by its attitude to the 2012 Quebec student strike. Although the majority of the NDP’s MPs are from Quebec, the NDP refused to even nominally support the striking students or to condemn Quebec’s Liberal government when it adopted Bill 78, legislation that effectively criminalized the strike.

Since Canada’s participation in the NATO air war on Yugoslavia in 1999, the NDP has lent its support to one Canadian military intervention after another, including the 2011 war for “regime change” in Libya.

Mulcair and the NDP leadership supported Israel’s war on Gaza last summer. They also fully backed the Harper government in its support of the 2014 US-orchestrated coup in Ukraine and its deployment of Canadian troops in provocative NATO maneuvers on Russia’s borders.

Mulcair and the NDP’s opposition to Canada’s participation in the latest Mideast war is for tactical, not principled reasons. The social democrats support the US-led coalition’s aim of toppling the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad and favor using the Canadian Armed Forces to supply weapons to the Iraqi army and Kurdish militias.

The NDP is now trying to present its opposition to Bill C-51 as a courageous stand in defense of democratic principles. In fact, Mulcair took nearly a month to reveal the party’s position on the bill and only came out against it after the *Globe and Mail* had done so, signaling thereby that it was opposed by important sections of the Canadian elite. Moreover, in opposing Bill C-51, the NDP has stressed its fealty to the national security apparatus and centered its objections on the lack of parliamentary oversight. Mulcair even placed on record that an NDP government would not repeal the measure, merely amend it—a position not very different from that of Trudeau and his Liberals.

However, with polls now showing that a majority of Canadians oppose Bill C-51, Mulcair has changed tack. Earlier this month, when speaking at an NDP rally in British Columbia, he pledged that an NDP government would repeal Bill C-51. This has nothing to do with a principled defense of democratic rights. The social democrats have simply concluded that a more emphatic oppositional stance will bring electoral dividends, especially in helping them distinguish themselves from the Liberals and posing as the “real” alternative to Harper and his Conservatives.



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