Canada’s NDP defends leader’s talks on joining Harper government

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Senior New Democratic Party (NDP) officials have rushed to defend party leader Thomas Mulcair following fresh revelations about his discussions in 2006 and 2007 on joining Stephen Harper’s Conservative government.

The story was first reported in 2007, but became more widely known in 2012 when Mulcair was running to replace the late Jack Layton as federal NDP leader.

A June 29 *Maclean’s* magazine article has provided new details about the content and scope of Mulcair’s talks with the Conservatives, including top Harper aides.

These include the fact that the Conservatives hoped to entice Mulcair into running under their banner in the next federal election, ultimately held in 2008, and that Mulcair sought the chairmanship of the now disbanded National Round Table for the Environment and the Economy, while the Conservatives had him pegged as a senior advisor to Harper on the environment.

Mulcair has never denied the talks. More than fourteen months elapsed between Mulcair’s resignation from his post as Environment Minister in the Quebec Liberal government of Jean Charest and his joining the NDP at Layton’s urging in April 2007. Five months later, Mulcair was elected to parliament in a by-election, becoming the NDP’s only Quebec MP.

Contacted by *Maclean’s*, Mulcair acknowledged that after initial discussions about joining the Conservatives in 2006, he approached Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s office in early 2007 to expand the discussion. “My last exchange,” Mulcair told *Maclean’s*, “was with then chief of staff Ian Brodie, who was also looking at an (appointment to an) advisory position. The only subject was Kyoto and climate change. He made it clear that my support for Kyoto would have to change. That, for me, was out of the question. This was our last conversation. Our talks broke off on climate change.”

A source within the Conservative government, former Harper press secretary Dmitri Soudas, has asserted that the deal fell through because Mulcair requested more money. He alleged to *Maclean’s* that Mulcair demanded $300,000, as opposed to the $180,000 the Conservatives were ready to offer. Soudas is hardly a credible source. After years as a government pit bull, Soudas had a falling-out with Harper in 2014 over his attempt to use his post as the Conservative Party’s executive director to push through the nomination of his fiancée in a safe Conservative seat. Soudas and his fiancée subsequently defected to the Liberals.

The media coverage has largely focused on assessing the veracity of the conflicting accounts. But whatever the real reason for the breakdown of Mulcair’s flirtation with the Tories, the fact that the talks reached such an advanced stage speaks volumes about the politics of the head of the ostensibly left, trade union-backed NDP as well as the right-wing character of the entire political establishment.

Within the space of a few months, Mulcair was able to seamlessly transition from being a Quebec Liberal cabinet minister, to negotiating with the Conservatives on joining the government, to becoming an up-and-coming member of the social-democratic NDP. It would be difficult to find a more revealing exposure of just how indistinguishable these parties of the ruling elite are.

During this transition Mulcair was actually approached by all four federalist parties in Canada’s parliament—the Conservatives, Liberals, NDP and Greens—about joining their ranks.

If Mulcair’s version of events is true, it provides a damning self-exposure. In no public statement has he indicated that he had any problem apart from Kyoto on working for Harper and his government. By the time Muclair was in talks with the Prime Minister’s Office about joining the Conservatives, Harper’s minority government had brought down an austerity, tax-cutting budget, aimed at creating a mechanism for justifying perpetual social spending cuts; had extended Canada’s leading role in the Afghan counterinsurgency war through 2009 and announced plans to dramatically increase military spending; and had brought in a spate of reactionary law-and-order bills.

Karl Belanger, Mulcair’s press secretary, tried to turn the NDP leader’s dalliance with Harper and the Conservatives

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into a positive sign. “It is no secret,” said Belanger, “that the four federalist parties approached him once he decided to leave provincial politics. It means, of course, that they believe he is a competent, prudent public administrator.”

In other words, Mulcair was recognized to be a reliable, right-wing bourgeois politician who could be counted upon to uphold the interests of Canada’s ruling elite.

A lifelong Liberal, Mulcair had proven his credentials as a “fiscally responsible” big-business politician during his frontbench role from 2003 to 2006 in Jean Charest’s Quebec government and during the subsequent 13 months that he remained a Quebec Liberal legislator.

Charest’s government was elected on a commitment to “re-engineer” the state through social spending cuts and privatizations. No sooner did it take office than it initiated a major attack on the working class, including making changes to the labour code to facilitate the contracting-out of jobs and hiking daycare fees. These measures precipitated a wave of protest and walkouts, including widespread calls for a province-wide general strike. Subsequently, the Charest government imposed seven-year concessionary contracts on half-a-million public sector workers and implemented Bill 33, legislation that undermines Medicare by opening health care up to private providers.

Mulcair fully supported this reactionary agenda. He quit the cabinet in 2006 after dissenting with Charest’s decision to open up a provincial park to private condominium developers.

Joining Belanger in lending support to Mulcair was British Columbia NDP MP and 2012 party leadership candidate Nathan Cullen. Cullen maintained that in 2007, a year after the Conservatives had come to power, it was still not possible to recognize the government’s reactionary character. He claimed that John Baird, the then environment minister, had indicated that the government was preparing to adopt a more environmentally friendly program. “Tom,” Cullen told the *Vancouver Sun*, “had left (the Quebec cabinet) on principle, and when someone (like Baird) offers you an ability to make change, even from an unlikely source, what’s more important? Your partisan future, or making the change?”

In truth, the Conservatives’ reactionary, anti-working-class agenda was plain for all to see from the get-go. A neoconservative ideologue and outspoken advocate of Canada’s participation in the US’s illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq, Harper had in 2004 emerged as the leader of the “new” Conservative Party, which fused Canada’s traditional Tories with the right-wing populist Reform/Canadian Alliance. While in the interests of winning office Harper chose to emphasize “Liberal corruption,” the new Conservatives made no secret of their admiration of the US Republicans and their intention, in the name of reducing taxes and eliminating government waste, to gut public and social services and more aggressively assert the interests of the Canadian elite on the world stage.

The NDP’s embrace of the Liberal Mulcair underscores the dramatic swing to the right by Canada’s social democrats over the past three decades. Long ago the NDP shredded its milquetoast reformist program in favour of policies virtually indistinguishable from the Conservatives and Liberals. Where it has held power, such as in Ontario in the 1990s, Saskatchewan from 1991-2007 or Manitoba from 1999 onwards, it has come into conflict with the working class as it slashes social spending and cuts taxes for big business, the upper middle-class and rich. Roy Romanow’s Saskatchewan government is still hailed in ruling circles for having eliminated a large budget deficit in three years by slashing spending on health care and social services.

The NDP has undergone a similar dramatic transformation in foreign policy. Beginning with its backing for NATO’s bombardment of Yugoslavia, the NDP has supported one imperialist military intervention after another, including the Afghan war and the 2011 “regime change” war in Libya. At Layton’s insistence, the NDP abandoned its nominal opposition to Canada’s participation in NATO in 2003. While voting in parliament against the current war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the NDP supports the continued presence of Canadian troops in the region under the guise of supplying anti-ISIS forces with weapons, as well as the US drive to militarily overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. And the NDP is fully supporting Canada’s leading role in the threats and NATO military build-up against Russia.

Mulcair’s contemplation of a career in Harper’s Conservative Party has failed to evoke a word of protest from any section of the NDP. Neither its backers in the trade union bureaucracy, nor self-styled “socialist” groups like Fightback which function within the NDP, have called attention to Mulcair’s flirtation with the most right-wing government in modern Canadian history. Instead, they are all preparing to play their part in an “anybody but Harper campaign” in the upcoming federal election that will see the NDP striving for a potential coalition with the big-business Liberals, or to govern alone with Mulcair as Prime Minister.

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