

Canada's NDP promises “change” and continued austerity

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The trade union-supported New Democratic Party (NDP) is seeking to appeal to mass disaffection with Stephen Harper's ten year-old Conservative government and with the Liberals, the Canadian ruling elite's other traditional party of government, by casting itself as the true party of “change.”

At the same time, it is anxiously seeking to reassure big business that an NDP government will deliver a balanced budget and leave in place the reactionary fiscal framework created by years of Liberal and Conservative tax cuts. In other words, little if anything will change should the NDP emerge as Canada's government after the October 19 federal election.

“I want to speak to every Canadian who thinks Mr. Harper's government is on the wrong track,” declared NDP leader Thomas Mulcair at the launch of the party's campaign last Sunday. “To every Canadian who is looking for change in Ottawa.”

The NDP, which has never formed Canada's federal government, currently leads the opinion polls. Most recent polls have shown a tight three-way race. But a poll published in the immediate aftermath of Sunday's election call gave the NDP 39 percent support, 11 percentage points ahead of the Conservatives.

Even with Canada's economy sliding into recession, Mulcair and other NDP spokesmen have been quick to recommit the NDP to a balanced budget. Indeed, in his maiden election speech Mulcair attacked the Conservatives who have imposed tens of billions of social spending cuts over the past five years, from the right, for having added \$150 billion to Canada's accumulated debt since the 2008 global financial crisis.

Mulcair is also peppering his speeches with conventional catch-phrases, tailored to underscore that the NDP long ago disavowed any pretension to be a “socialist party” and does not even advocate significant social reform. A former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister who only joined the NDP in 2007, Mulcair has repeatedly promised that the NDP will provide “good public administration,” and is committed to

the “Canadian values” of hard work and “living within one's means.”

The meager policy changes being proposed by Mulcair will do nothing to alleviate the deepening poverty among working people or halt the growth of social inequality. Were it implemented, the NDP's flagship policy of raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 per hour would impact on less than 1 percent of the workforce.

Although Liberal and Conservative governments have dramatically slashed the taxes of the rich and super-rich over the past two decades, Mulcair is adamant that an NDP government will not raise personal income or capital gains taxes on even the richest 1 percent of Canadians.

As for corporate taxes, the NDP is proposing to cut those on small businesses even faster than the current Conservative government and to raise those on the largest companies, but only so as to bring them in line with other G7 countries. Canada's combined (federal/provincial) corporate tax rate must, insists Mulcair, remain lower than that in the US. In Montreal on Tuesday, he emphasized that any corporate tax hikes would be “slight and graduated.”

Big business has got the message. A *Bloomberg* article published this week observed that the NDP had moved sharply further right under Mulcair's leadership so as to prepare for government. Senior NDP MP Charlie Angus made the revealing remark, “The party used to think its purpose was to be the conscience of the nation rather than to win. Now our base understands it's about forming government.”

In the campaign's first days, Mulcair has studiously avoided making any foreign policy statements, thereby demonstrating that that NDP has no serious objection to the aggressive, militarist foreign policy of the Harper government.

The Conservative government has increasingly integrated Canada into all three of the major military-strategic offensives of the US—against Russia and China and in the Middle East.

In 2011, Canada was a major partner in NATO's regime

change war in Libya, in which the western powers allied with Islamist forces to overthrow the Gaddafi regime. Ottawa has been a staunch backer of the far-right regime in Kiev that was brought to power in February 2014 in a US-orchestrated, fascist-led coup. It has defended the regime's brutal war against the Ukrainian population in the east, and fully participated in the aggressive deployment of NATO forces throughout eastern Europe against Russia. Canada is also one of the US's main partners in the new Mideast war in Iraq and Syria. This war currently targets ISIS, but ultimately it is aimed at overthrowing the Assad government and shoring up US domination over the world's most important oil-exporting region.

Beginning with NATO's bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999, the NDP has transformed itself into an open proponent of Canadian imperialism's military interventions. It supported the Libyan war, has sided entirely with Harper's anti-Moscow rhetoric that paints Russia as the aggressor in eastern Europe, and presented a motion to parliament last March calling for the continued presence of Canadian troops in Iraq to supply local proxies with weapons.

The only time Mulcair has thus far broken his foreign-policy silence was when he announced his party's support for the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal, a US-led initiative aimed at isolating China and securing Washington's economic and geopolitical dominance in the Asia-Pacific region.

In his second public appearance of the campaign in Quebec on Tuesday, Mulcair made reference to his party's opposition to the draconian and anti-democratic Bill C-51, which he vowed to repeal upon coming to power.

This is yet another instance in which Mulcair's pledges cannot be taken at face value. When the bill was first presented in January, the NDP delayed taking a position for almost a month. Only after the *Globe and Mail* came out against the legislation, reflecting concerns in the ruling class that it represented too blatant a break with bourgeois-democratic norms, did Mulcair announce that NDP MPs would vote against Bill C-51.

The lack of any principled opposition from the NDP to the assault on democratic rights is shown by its readiness to form a coalition with the Liberals, a party which voted in favour of Bill C-51 in parliament and vastly expanded the national-security apparatus under the guise of the "war on terror" when it was last in office. It was the Chretien-Martin Liberal government that in the wake of 9/11 established the legal framework for mass surveillance of Canadians' electronic communications and otherwise dramatically expanded police powers.

The reactionary character of such a coalition is further demonstrated by the two parties' abortive coalition effort in

2008, when the Liberals and NDP struck an agreement to oust Harper from office. Under the 2008 coalition pact, the NDP committed to "fiscal responsibility," i.e. austerity, making billions in further tax cuts for business, and waging war in Afghanistan through 2011.

Repeatedly over the past eight months, Mulcair has touted the 2008 coalition agreement and emphasized the NDP's readiness to join forces with the Liberals. His frequent references to his party's role as the foremost advocate for the "middle class" are aimed at portraying the NDP as a party of the moderate centre, and closely mirrors the rhetoric employed by Liberal leader Justin Trudeau.

The campaign for a coalition is backed by the trade unions, which have invested considerable funds in launching anti-Harper attack ads as part of a broader effort to push for "an anybody but Conservative" vote and an NDP-Liberal coalition.

A majority NDP government would be no better. On top of its right-wing economic policies and support for Canadian imperialism, the party has demonstrated whenever it has held power that it is unwavering in its defence of the ruling elite and the bourgeois order. In a series of provincial governments since the beginning of the 1990s, including Bob Rae's in Ontario, Roy Romanow's in Saskatchewan and Gary Dewar's in Manitoba, the NDP has confronted the working class head on by imposing devastating austerity measures to eliminate budget deficits and attack workers' living standards.

The NDP has used its victory in May's provincial election in Alberta to send an unmistakable signal to Canadian big business. It has appointed former Bank of Canada Governor David Dodge to draft a plan for government spending on infrastructure which will lay out how balancing the budget can be combined with serving the needs of Big Oil and the province's business elite. The NDP's much trumpeted review of the oil industry's royalties structure is being headed by an industry insider, David Mowat, the CEO of ATB Financial.



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