

Canada's New Democrats seek to bolster right-wing economic credentials

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19 August 2015

New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Thomas Mulcair used the unveiling of one of the party's star candidates at a press conference in Toronto on Friday to advance a reactionary, right-wing economic agenda, making clear that an NDP government would be based on "fiscal responsibility" and a balanced budget.

Mulcair visited the riding of Eglinton-Lawrence, currently held by Conservative finance minister Joe Oliver. He announced that the NDP had recruited former Saskatchewan finance minister Andrew Thompson to challenge current federal finance minister Joe Oliver on October 19.

Mulcair introduced Thompson by criticizing the Conservatives from the right. "The NDP's Andrew Thompson offers the people of Eglinton-Lawrence something that Joe Oliver hasn't: a record of balanced budgets," Mulcair declared.

Right on cue, Thompson gave an interview to the *Ottawa Citizen* on Monday in which he advanced the NDP as a safe pair of hands for the ruling elite in the deepening economic crisis. "Tom Mulcair has been in government; he knows what those tough choices are like. I have been in government; I know what those tough choices are like. There's no sense in promising pie-in-the-sky types of policies if they can't be implemented," he declared.

After referring to the NDP's "strong attention to spending discipline," Thompson continued, "We are obviously committed to social spending, but at the same time are also committed to making sure budgets are balanced and that governments live within their means."

The promotion of Thompson as the NDP's star candidate should serve as a warning to workers across the country as to the character of an NDP-led government. He served as finance minister in the NDP Saskatchewan government from 2006 to 2007, during which time he implemented the largest package of tax cuts in the

province's history. Prior to that, he had served in the cabinet of NDP Premier Lorne Calvert since 2001.

Calvert's government continued to enforce the legacy of right-wing NDP Premier Roy Romanow, who came to power in Regina in the 1990s and forced through devastating cuts to social welfare and public services to balance the province's books. Romanow was so successful in implementing the measures insisted upon by big business that even the neo-liberal Fraser Institute think tank recently praised his government as an example of how there is no one political party in Canada with a monopoly on "fiscal responsibility."

Thompson's appointment was also calculated to appeal to big oil and the energy sector. He served as the province's minister for energy and mines, where he proposed a reduction to royalties paid by the corporations to encourage investment. At the news conference Friday, Thompson stated that he was "a strong supporter of our resource-based economy."

Thompson passed seamlessly from his position as an NDP minister to a consultant position in the private sector. In 2010, he was promoted to director of sales and strategy for the Asia-Pacific region at Cisco Systems Inc.

The press conference was part of a determined drive by the NDP to reassure the Canadian ruling elite that the party can be trusted to uphold its interests and carry through the attacks on working people it will demand under conditions of a deepening economic crisis.

The NDP's full acceptance of the fiscal framework imposed by years of budget cuts and tax handouts to the super rich under successive Liberal and Conservative governments has been repeated by Mulcair at virtually every opportunity, including the pledge that a government led by him would not increase taxes on the wealthy.

On the world stage, the NDP has demonstrated its loyalty to Canadian imperialism by supporting a series of interventions around the world since the NATO-led

bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999.

Mulcair's position on the need for a balanced budget puts the NDP even to the right of the Liberals, the Canadian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government for much of the 20th century. While accepting the goal of a balanced budget, Liberal leader Justin Trudeau has refused to commit to a timetable for achieving it. He has based his fiscal credentials on frequent references to the budgetary record of the Chretien-Martin Liberal government, which left office in 2006 after implementing the largest social spending cuts in Canadian history.

This record has not stopped Mulcair and the NDP, supported by large sections of the trade union bureaucracy with their anybody-but-Harper campaign, from holding out the prospect of an NDP-Liberal coalition after October 19.

Mulcair also pledged Friday to strengthen the powers of the parliamentary budget officer and establish it as an independent parliamentary position. "We'll remove the Prime Minister's power to fire the parliamentary budget officer and make them an independent officer of parliament like the auditor general," he announced. "We'll make transparency the law so that future governments can't hide financial information from Canadians."

Behind his posture of openness and transparency in government, Mulcair's real concern is the creation of a body capable of enforcing the measures demanded by big business to cut spending. He vowed that an NDP government would oblige all departments to submit financial information to the budget officer for independent vetting.

The proposal won support from across the political spectrum, with John Ivison of the right-wing *National Post* writing approvingly, "it can't hurt to formalize freedom from political interference."

Kevin Page, parliamentary budget officer under the Conservatives until 2012, provided an indication of the role the body would assume. He recently issued a warning to the parties not to consider raising taxes to pay for election promises. He told CBC, "We need a bit more realism. Maybe it's hard in the political environment to be realistic, but we need to be realistic."

For Page, being "realistic" means that governments must be open about the need to take unpopular decisions. "I think a future government is going to have to look at 'do we have the resources to make sure we're still getting cheques going out to seniors, we're taking care of meat inspectors, we're taking care of the Coast Guard, of

veterans'," he told CBC's *The House* in July.

It is now widely expected that the government will run a deficit this year. Canada is almost certainly in a recession following contracting economic growth in the first five months of 2015. Prime Minister Stephen Harper recently admitted that no major spending plans would be possible in the next two budgets due to fiscal pressures.

The NDP has responded to these conditions by moving further to the right. It is proposing no major social spending commitments should it take power. The plan to introduce a \$15 an hour minimum wage for federal workers will impact a tiny minority of working people. Their sole job creation measure is to offer cuts in taxes for small and medium-sized businesses, together with a slight increase in corporate tax rates on the largest companies.

Another plank of Mulcair's pitch to the ruling elite is his determination to uphold Canadian corporate interests on the world stage. He recently declared the NDP's full backing for the Trans-Pacific Partnership deal, the US-led free trade agreement aimed at isolating China and expanding markets for major corporations. Canadian big business is overwhelmingly behind the deal, seeing opportunities for growth in Southeast Asia.

Growing sections of the ruling elite recognize that the prospect of an NDP government presents no cause for concern. A slew of articles have appeared in the press commenting on Mulcair's responsible leadership style. Bruce Anderson in the *Globe and Mail* noted recently that the NDP had moved "towards the centre" under Mulcair, adding that he "talks less about helping unionized workers than he does helping small businesses."

Writing in the same paper, Konrad Yakabuski concluded an enthusiastic defence of Mulcair's leadership of the NDP with the remark, "Mulcair's NDP has thrown much of the party's past under its campaign bus."



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