

Canada's NDP to prop up big business Liberal government

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Canada's social democratic party, the New Democrats (NDP), has all but announced it will support the coming to power of a Liberal minority or Liberal-led coalition government after next Monday's federal election.

NDP leader Tom Mulcair has repeatedly said that should no party emerge on October 19 with a parliamentary majority, his party would be ready to form a coalition government with the big business Liberals.

However, in its election platform issued last Friday, the NDP went further. The platform formally pledges the NDP to working "with other federalist parties through informal or appropriate stable arrangements to end (Conservative Prime Minister) Stephen Harper's lost decade."

Given that the Liberals now lead in the polls while the NDP has fallen to a distant third, this is a pledge to assist Justin Trudeau in becoming prime minister, as the head either of a Liberal minority government or a Liberal-NDP coalition.

The platform's reference to "appropriate stable arrangements" covers both a coalition, in which the NDP would take cabinet portfolios in a Liberal-led government, and an "accord." Under the latter scenario, the NDP would commit to propping up a Liberal government in parliament for a set period, in all likelihood measured in years, in exchange for a Liberal pledge to implement a series of agreed-upon measures.

Appearing on the CTV program "Question Period" Sunday, Mulcair said he believes the door to a coalition with the Liberals remains open, even if Trudeau has repeatedly said that while he is willing to work with the NDP in parliament, he is not prepared to join with it in a governmental coalition. In any event, insisted Mulcair, the NDP's top priority is to oust Harper and his Conservatives from power.

A Liberal-led government, however constituted, would be an instrument of big business for intensifying the assault on the working class. It would use "progressive" rhetoric all the better to pursue the ruling class's agenda of austerity and imperialist aggression.

When they last held power federally, the Liberals imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, cutting tens of billions of dollars from health care, post-secondary education and welfare, and drastically restricting eligibility to unemployment insurance. The Chretien-Martin government

subsequently implemented massive corporate, capital gains and personal income tax cuts designed to swell business profits and the incomes of the rich and super-rich.

In aligning Canada with Washington's military-strategic offensives against Russia and China and in the Middle East, Harper and his Conservatives have only continued on the course blazed by their Liberal predecessors. The Chretien-Martin government ordered Canada's military to play a leading role in the 1999 war on Yugoslavia, the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, and the US regime-change operation that overthrew Haiti's democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, in 2004. Moreover, it was under the Liberals that Ottawa launched a rearmament program that, by 2011, saw Canada spending more on its military in real, inflation-adjusted dollars than at any time since World War II.

Canadian big business's preferred party of government during most of the Twentieth Century, the Liberals entered the election campaign trailing in third place. However, they have now catapulted into first, at least according to the opinion polls, on the basis of extremely limited and hypocritical appeals to popular anger over social inequality and economic insecurity. The Liberals are promising a middle class tax cut to be financed by modestly increasing taxes on the richest 1 percent of Canadians (those earning more than \$200,000 per year), and pledging to boost economic growth through an infrastructure program financed by three years of deficit-spending.

The NDP, for its part, has mounted a "Harper lite" campaign aimed at convincing big business that the social democrats will uphold its interests at home and abroad just as implacably as Harper and his Conservatives. Repeatedly, NDP leader Tom Mulcair has attacked the Liberals from the right. He has chastised them for pledging to scrap the purchase of F-35 stealth fighter jets and for their "fiscally irresponsible" deficit-spending plan. And the NDP leader is adamant that the richest Canadians are already paying their "fair share." No matter that their share of the national income and wealth has soared during the past three decades as the result of the double-bounty of spectacular income growth and massive tax cuts.

Trying to cloak the NDP's readiness to support the formation of a big business Liberal government in a semblance of principle, Mulcair declared last weekend that he will have

“nothing to do with that Stephen Harper,” given his resort to “very dangerous race politics”—a reference to the Conservatives’ stoking of anti-Muslim sentiment through their anti-niqab campaign. (See: “Canada’s Conservatives stoke anti-Muslim bigotry”)

However, the Liberals are themselves entirely complicit in the attack on Canadians’ democratic rights and the promotion of social reaction. They voted for and helped provide legitimacy to the Conservatives’ draconian Bill C-51, which vastly strengthens the arbitrary powers of the national-security apparatus, including giving the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) the right to break virtually any law when disrupting alleged threats to Canada’s national and economic security.

Moreover, Trudeau’s closest political allies in Quebec are to be found in Philippe Couillard’s rightwing provincial Liberal government. The Couillard government has introduced legislation, Bill 62, that goes far beyond Harper’s current niqab ban, stipulating that Muslim women who wear a religious face-covering should be denied all access to public services, including health care and education.

The social democrats and the trade unions, which were pivotal to the NDP’s formation in 1961 and remain staunch allies, have long been oriented toward working with the Liberals.

Under conditions where both the unions and the NDP have moved sharply to the right, presiding over the implementation of wage cuts and job cuts and the dismantling of the welfare state programs they once held up as proof that capitalism could be “humanized,” the NDP and the Liberals have become ever more closely allied.

In December 2008, the NDP agreed to join a Liberal-led coalition government committed to “fiscal responsibility,” implementing a Liberal-Conservative plan to slash corporate taxes by \$50 billion over 5 years, and waging war in Afghanistan through 2011. The coalition agreement unraveled after Harper, with the overwhelming support of the Canadian ruling class, used the un-elected office of the governor general to shut down parliament, thereby preventing the opposition parties from exercising their constitutional right to defeat the government.

The 2008 coalition negotiations were mentored by Chretien and former federal NDP leader and party “elder statesman” Ed Broadbent. For several years thereafter, Chretien and Broadbent helped lead informal backroom discussions about a possible NDP-Liberal merger.

In the current election, the unions are spearheading an “Anybody but Harper” campaign. It is expressly modeled after the “Stop Hudak” campaign the unions mounted in Ontario in the name of preventing Tim Hudak and his Conservatives from coming to power in Canada’s most populous province. The unions “stopped Hudak” by having the NDP maintain in power a minority Liberal government that imposed sweeping social

spending cuts and criminalized teacher strikes. Then when new elections were called, the unions stumped, via “strategic voting,” for the Liberals’ reelection.

Having won a majority with the unions’ support, Ontario’s Liberals have pressed ahead with their austerity program, imposing a two-year public-sector wage freeze and selling off a majority share in Ontario Hydro One, the largest privatization in Canada in decades. Ontario Liberal Premier Kathleen Wynne has frequently appeared at Trudeau’s campaign events and many of Trudeau’s closest advisors are key architects of Ontario’s union-supported ostensibly “progressive” Liberal government.

In recent weeks, as indicated by the corporate media’s highly favourable coverage of Trudeau’s campaign and the editorial endorsement of Quebec’s most influential daily, *La Presse*, significant sections of the ruling class have rallied behind the Liberals. They are concerned that the Conservatives’ fear-mongering and stoking of bigotry and backwardness will incite popular opposition, potentially providing the catalyst for the eruption of working class opposition to austerity and war. As one pollster noted, “Canadians will be apoplectic if Stephen Harper wins another majority.”

These sections of the bourgeoisie calculate that a new government will be better able to pursue austerity and war by repackaging them under a progressive veneer, including making more systematic use of the unions as partners in suppressing the class struggle and boosting corporate profitability.

The Liberals do, after all, have a long record of using avowedly rightwing parties as an electoral foil, only to implement their policies once in power. To cite but one example: in 1993, Chretien denounced the Conservatives for their “fixation” with eliminating the budget deficit and promised instead to focus on “jobs, jobs, jobs.” His government subsequently implemented the greatest ever social spending cuts, while also reneging on its promise to repeal the regressive Good and Services Tax and renegotiate NAFTA.



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