

Canada's NDP rallies behind Mulcair after election debacle

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Canada's social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) suffered a debacle in the October 19 federal election, losing its status as the Official Opposition and more than half of its 95 MPs. The NDP now holds just 44 seats in the 338-member House of Commons.

Senior figures within the party have reacted to this rout by declaring their full support for Tom Mulcair continuing as the NDP's federal party leader. An ex-Quebec Liberal cabinet minister, austerity advocate, and avowed admirer of Margaret Thatcher, Mulcair has declared his intention to stay at the NDP's battered helm.

The October 19 election represented a massive popular repudiation of a decade of Conservative rule. Nevertheless, in many respects the trade union-backed NDP was the election's biggest loser.

When Prime Minister Stephen Harper dropped the election writ on August 1, the NDP was atop the polls and appeared poised to lead Canada's national government for the first time ever. Yet on election day, it garnered just 19.7 percent of the popular vote, a 10.9 percentage-point drop from the 30.6 percent share of the vote it had taken in the 2011 federal election.

Under conditions where there was a more than 7 percentage-point increase in voter participation, the NDP lost almost a million votes (964,000) as compared with 2011. By contrast the Conservatives lost just 54,000 votes.

The NDP suffered losses in virtually every part of the country.

In the Atlantic provinces, the party lost all six seats it held when the election was called, including the Halifax-area seat of the party's deputy leader, Megan Leslie.

In Quebec, where the NDP had won 59 seats in 2011, it hung on to just 16.

In Ontario and Manitoba, the NDP's results were no less disastrous. The NDP won just 8 of Ontario's 121 seats, as compared with 22 in 2011, and garnered just 16.6 percent of the popular vote. The NDP won no seats in the Greater Toronto Area, losing all 8 seats it held in the City of Toronto, including that formerly represented by the party's late leader, Jack Layton.

In Manitoba—where the NDP forms a widely despised, pro-big business provincial government—the NDP won just 2 seats and a derisory 13.8 percent share of the popular vote.

Leslie is one of a number of high-profile defeated NDP MPs who have sprung to the defence of Mulcair. In the process, she and others have insisted that the NDP could have done little if anything to prevent the Liberals, who when last in office carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, from portraying themselves as the agents of “real change” and the “true progressives.”

Speaking three days after the election, Leslie described the election results as “devastating” for her party and deplored the loss of many high-profile MPs, including defence critic Jack Harris and foreign affairs critic Paul Dewar. But she insisted the party had been the unwitting victim of a “Liberal wave.” “People with the best of intentions,” claimed Leslie, “do

believe that there is very little policy difference between the Liberals and the NDP.” She then went on to endorse Mulcair's continued leadership: “I think Tom at the helm is a positive thing. He can keep us steady.”

For his part, Robin Sears, the NDP's former national director, weighed in with a warning to anyone who might question the role of Mulcair and his advisors, many of whom are former top Layton aides. Said Sears of Mulcair, “He will not be pushed and anybody who does push will be quite publicly slapped.”

The NDP and Quebec

Desperate to explain away the NDP's debacle, the party leadership, drawing on the superficial analyses offered up by the corporate media, is blaming its loss of support, above all in Quebec, on the reactionary, Islamophobic appeal that was made by the Conservatives and the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Québécois (BQ). Working in tandem, the Conservatives and BQ denounced the NDP for betraying Canadian and Quebec “values” because it opposes a ban on the wearing of the niqab at Canadian citizenship ceremonies.

The NDP leadership's claims hold no water. First, the NDP's decline in the opinion polls preceded the niqab becoming a major election issue. Second, those who deserted the NDP rallied round the Liberals, who like the NDP opposed the Conservatives' niqab ban. Furthermore, the joint Conservative-BQ campaign over the niqab hardly proved to be an electoral winner. Their combined share of Quebec's popular vote fell by 4 percentage points from 2011.

What triggered the collapse of NDP support in Quebec was its pro-austerity stance: its “Harper lite” campaign, which included attacks on the Liberals from the right for advocating deficit-spending and marginally higher taxes for the richest 1 percent; and its indifference and hostility to the struggles of Quebec workers and youth.

In keeping with their efforts to convince big business that the NDP would govern on its behalf, the social-democrats have kept mum about the massive protests in Quebec against the brutal austerity measures currently being imposed by the provincial Liberal government of Philippe Couillard.

Mulcair did, however, have kind words, mid-campaign for Couillard, whom he noted was a friend and ex-cabinet colleague, as well as for Montreal Mayor Coderre. Last year, Coderre spearheaded a successful campaign to get the Couillard government to adopt legislation slashing Quebec municipal workers' pensions.

In 2012, when Quebec was convulsed by a six-month long student strike against university tuition fee hikes, the NDP refused to even nominally support the students. Its fear and hostility to a genuine challenge to austerity was highlighted by the NDP's failure to condemn Bill 78, the

Quebec government's draconian anti-strike bill, on the spurious grounds it was a "provincial matter" and to oppose it would take away from the fight against Harper—as if Harper wasn't fully behind the Quebec Liberals austerity drive and the state suppression of the student strike.

The union and NDPs' political rehabilitation of the Liberals

Other NDP representatives and apologists have sought to pin the blame for the NDP's rout on "strategic voting." Such explanations however fail to even begin to address how it was that the big business Liberals, who when they last held office blazed the trail for Harper with their social spending cuts, revamping of the tax system to further benefit big business and the rich, and foreign military interventions, were able to successfully pose as a "progressive" alternative to Harper's Conservatives.

The truth is, the pivotal role in the political rehabilitation of Justin Trudeau and his Liberals was played by the trade unions and the NDP. For years, they have been promoting the Liberals as a "progressive" ally in the fight against Harper. In 2005, they propped up Paul Martin's tottering Liberal government; in 2008, they formed an abortive government coalition with the Liberals; in the run-up to this year's election, the NDP repeatedly declared its readiness to join a government coalition with the Liberals. Meanwhile, in Ontario, the unions have for years openly supported a right-wing Liberal government, in the name of keeping out the Conservatives, and have continued to do so as the Liberals slashed social spending and criminalized teacher strikes.

With the unions' support, the NDP ran an explicitly right-wing election campaign, which alienated workers looking for an end to the social reaction and militarism of the Harper years while facilitating the Liberals' fraudulent attempts to pose as opponents of the Conservatives' right-wing, pro-big business policies.

Mulcair and the NDP insisted that if they formed government, they would implement four balanced budgets. This involved accepting the reactionary fiscal framework created by successive Liberal and Conservative governments through decades of public spending cuts and tax handouts to the rich.

The NDP leader avoided making even the vaguest of appeals to popular hostility against growing social inequality, with Mulcair baldly asserting that all Canadians—even the top 1 percent—are already paying their "fair share" of taxes.

The NDP also campaigned on increased military spending and a pledge to "modernize" Canada's armed forces so that they can intervene around the globe. Mulcair boasted of his support for the aggressive anti-Russian stance of the Harper government, including the training of the army and national guard in Ukraine by Canadian troops, and, despite his call for an end to CF-8 bombing missions in the Middle East, he vowed that Canada would remain part of the US-led war coalition in Iraq and Syria.

The trade unions, meanwhile, spearheaded the push for strategic voting—i.e., the election of Liberals—with a year-long "Anyone but Harper" campaign. Millions of dollars were poured into attack ads and initiatives aimed at persuading union members to vote for any candidate capable of defeating Conservative incumbents.

After assisting Kathleen Wynne and her Ontario Liberals in securing a majority in the June 2014 provincial election, by dressing up the Wynne government's commitment to continued austerity and net-zero pay agreements for public sector workers as a "progressive agenda," the unions have now helped Trudeau's Liberals repackage big business's agenda of austerity and war so as to win government at the national level.

Predictably both the NDP and the unions have responded to the election of a Liberal majority government by offering to collaborate with it.

In his election night concession speech, Mulcair declared that the goal of defeating the Conservatives had been achieved with Trudeau's "exceptional" victory. Speaking to the Canadian Press a week later, Mulcair declared, "I think, at least we can say for that part of it ... mission accomplished ... it was the key condition that I had set down and we got that job done. He's [Harper's] no longer there."

The unions have not been able to contain their delight at the return to power of the Canadian ruling elite's traditional alternate party of government—a government that, as in the past, will quickly shed its "progressive" promises to impose the agenda of big business.

The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), the country's largest union federation, rushed to publish a statement entitled "Canadians reject politics of fear and division: CLC hopeful for progressive change under Liberal government."

Pseudo-left groups such as Fightback, the International Socialists, and Socialist Action have responded to the election results by expressing disappointment at the NDP's rout and by rushing to help shore up the tattered remnants of Canadian social-democracy.

According to them, the NDP can be revived and made a genuine working-class instrument for opposing big business if Mulcair and a few other right-wingers are packed off into retirement. In an October 21 statement titled, "It's time for Mulcair and his team to go!" Socialist Action leader Barry Weisleder declared, "The NDP, the only mass, labour-based political party in North America remains viable as a potential leftist challenger to capitalist austerity, climate injustice, social inequality, racism, sexism, and war."

This is so much poppycock. The NDP, like its social democratic counterparts around the world, is a right-wing party of big business, which is indistinguishable from the other bourgeois parties. Its insistence on balanced budgets and austerity policies was not merely an invention of the latest campaign. Whenever the NDP has held office over the past quarter-century, from Nova Scotia and Ontario to Saskatchewan and British Columbia it has slashed public services, and attacked worker rights.

Similarly, the NDP has supported virtually every imperialist intervention Canada has mounted since the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999, including Canada's leading role in the Afghan war, the 2004 intervention that ousted Haiti's elected president, and NATO's 2011 "regime change" war in Libya.



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