

Canada: NDP leader Mulcair “apologizes” for social democrats’ election debacle

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Following the release of an interim report from New Democratic Party (NDP) President Rebecca Blaikie, federal NDP leader Tom Mulcair has penned a letter of apology to all party members and supporters titled “Personal reflections.” In this thousand-word missive, Mulcair says that he takes “full responsibility” for the NDP’s debacle in last October’s national election and promises to “make the necessary changes” so as to ensure that the “mistakes of the campaign will never be repeated.”

Any expectation, however, that these promised “changes” will alter the pro-capitalist, pro-imperialist perspective of Mulcair, his parliamentary caucus, and the NDP’s array of well-heeled party functionaries should be awaited with the same anticipation as an invitation to watch a leopard change its spots.

In the October 19 federal election, Canada’s social democratic NDP suffered a debacle as the big business Liberal Party of Justin Trudeau soundly defeated Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, while the NDP was reduced to an also-ran. In the rout, the NDP lost its status as the Official Opposition and more than half of its 95 MPs. Today the trade union-backed NDP holds just 44 seats in the 338-member House of Commons, after suffering losses in virtually every part of the country.

Mulcair will face a mandatory leadership review at the upcoming party convention to be held this April in Edmonton, Alberta. An ex-Quebec Liberal cabinet minister, austerity advocate, and avowed admirer of Margaret Thatcher, Mulcair has declared his intention to stay on at the NDP’s battered helm. To date, no significant figure in the party or in the trade union bureaucracy has publicly challenged that plan.

The October 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, after

pointedly campaigning to the right of the Liberals on key economic issues, it garnered just 19.7 percent of the popular vote, a 10.9 percentage-point drop from the 30.6 percent share it had taken in the 2011 federal election.

Even 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.

Blaikie’s interim autopsy of the election defeat centered on the party’s inability to counter the “progressive” image fostered by Trudeau and his Liberals—in particular the Liberal’s promise to “kick-start” a faltering economy through a deficit spending-financed infrastructure program. In contrast, Mulcair ran a “Harper-Lite” campaign, echoing the tired nostrums of the Conservatives about the need to balance the budget at all costs.

The NDP came out against any personal tax increases, even on the wealthiest Canadians, claiming the top 1.0 and 0.1 percent are already “paying their fair share”. Rejecting the growing unease and anger in the population over increasing social inequality, Mulcair declared that “the greatest inequality in our society is between generations,” giving credibility to the right-wing claim that older workers, even as they are stripped of quality pensions and medical benefits, have too many entitlements.

With the full backing of the NDP and trade union officialdom, Mulcair spent the entire election campaign promoting himself as a right-wing establishment politician, and otherwise distancing Canada’s social democrats from any association, however remote, with the working class or significant social reform.

On foreign policy, while Mulcair reiterated the NDP’s commitment to end the Canadian armed forces’ Mideast combat mission in the Middle East, he vowed that under an NDP government Canada would remain part of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition, which serves as a cover for Washington’s drive to dominate the Middle East, including its push for regime change in Damascus.

Mulcair emphasized that the NDP stood ready to deploy

Canadian troops, including in battle, citing as examples the NDP's support for NATO's 2011 regime-change war in Libya and its "spontaneous" endorsement of the military assistance Canada has provided France in Mali. "We understand," said Mulcair, "that there will be times when we have to ... use force. We won't shy away from that." The party, further, promised to implement the 10-year program of military spending increases the Conservatives announced in their last budget.

Mulcair criticized Harper for not doing enough to counter Islamic "radicalization" at home, then immediately touted the NDP's plan to fund the hiring of 2,500 additional police.

The party leadership, drawing on the superficial analyses offered up by the corporate media, continues to blame its loss of support 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 opposed 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.

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 corporations 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 had promoted 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 coalition with the Liberals; in the run-up to the 2015 federal election, the NDP repeatedly declared its readiness to join a coalition government 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. At the unions' behest the

NDP sustained a Liberal minority government at Queen's Park for close to two years in 2012-14, as it slashed social spending and criminalized teacher strikes.

While encouraging the NDP in its shift still further right, the trade unions 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 the local candidate most likely to defeat the Conservative incumbent.

What "changes" does Mulcair now propose to right the sinking NDP ship?

In his "reflections," Mulcair offers some bland organizational tropes. The next campaign will be less "cautious." Policy communications should be more accessible and backed by an "over-riding narrative." Caucus members will have more room to initiate "projects." There will be closer connections between sitting MPs and "the grass-roots." The new chief of staff, party veteran Raymond Guardia and new deputy chief of staff Jordan Lechnitz will lead the way. Here Mulcair omits to mention that Guardia acted in the last party leadership race as campaign manager for Brian Topp, a key architect of the NDP's 2008 coalition deal with the Liberals, whilst Lechnitz has been for several years at the centre of party policy-making as Deputy Director of Political Research and Issues Management.

Mulcair, stung by criticism that the NDP failed to advance policies addressing social inequality made a point of noting at the end of his mea culpa that "over the past generation, economic growth of more than 50 percent has not been of any benefit to the vast majority of Canadians who built the economy." A major factor in that, one Mulcair carefully chose to ignore, has been the austerity policies the NDP has implemented whenever it has held provincial office, including in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Nova Scotia and now Alberta.



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