

BC Liberals cling to power after election ends in dead heat

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The outcome of Tuesday's provincial election in British Columbia remains unclear as neither the governing Liberals nor the trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP) managed to secure the 44 seats required to form a majority, leaving the Green Party—at least for the moment—holding the balance of power in a hung or minority legislature.

Final results will only be known May 24, following the counting of tens of thousands of absentee ballots.

The absentee ballots, as well as several recounts, could shift the outcome in a number of closely contested seats, meaning the Liberals, or even the NDP, could ultimately win a parliamentary majority.

The big business Liberal Party, which has governed Canada's third most populous province for the past 16 years, is currently projected to win 43 seats, but in Courtenay-Comox, a Vancouver Island electoral district, it is currently losing by just nine votes. Were the Liberals to ultimately prevail in Courtenay-Comox, they would have a one-seat majority in the 87-seat legislature. There are four other seats that could conceivably change hands after the absentee ballots are included, so slender are the current victory margins.

Even if the current party standings remain unchanged after the tallying of the absentee ballots, the NDP, with 41 seats, could still form the province's government if it reaches a deal with the Greens.

In Tuesday's vote, the Greens tripled their representation in the BC legislature, from one to three seats, and won 16.76 percent of the popular vote, more than double their vote share in 2013. The Liberals captured 40.86 percent of the vote, down 5 percentage points from 2013, while the NDP's share of the popular vote fell 2.25 percentage points to 39.85 percent.

The inability of the New Democrats to secure a majority against a hated four-term Liberal Party government that has attacked workers' rights, slashed public spending, showered tax handouts on the wealthy, and privatized and slashed spending on public services, is bound up with their own right-wing record. Throughout the campaign, party leader John

Horgan insisted on the need for the NDP to provide “fiscally responsible” government.

The NDP ran on the basis of a spending plan which Horgan himself acknowledged was based on the Liberals' own reactionary three-year fiscal plan. “[The BC Liberals] tabled a three-year fiscal plan. We took that plan and made different choices. I believe that that's a prudent and responsible thing to do and that's the way I've done it,” Horgan told the *Globe and Mail*.

The NDP did gain some ground in urban areas, defeating Liberal cabinet minister Peter Fassbinder in Surrey and gaining seats in other Vancouver suburbs, such as Richmond. But the Liberals held their ground in the interior of the province, where they focused their attack on the NDP's opposition to several major resource extraction projects, and even made gains at the NDP's expense in the Kootenay region. The Green Party won all three of its seats on Vancouver Island.

The Liberals' apparent failure to secure a parliamentary majority is a blow to Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government. While the BC Liberals are a separate party (effectively a provincial coalition of Liberals, Conservatives, and one-time Social Crediters), Trudeau made clear his strong support for the re-election of Premier Christy Clark and her BC Liberals. One reason for this is that both parties are keen to build the Kinder Morgan Transmountain oil pipeline, which would provide a means for Alberta tar sands oil to reach Asian markets.

Green Party leader Andrew Weaver, who twice voted for right-wing Liberal budgets in the outgoing legislature, has refused to be drawn into a discussion as to which party he will support should the Greens end up holding the balance of power. During the election campaign, Weaver attacked the NDP from the right for its alleged profligate social spending promises. The Greens also endorsed the protectionist and chauvinist foreign home buyers' tax, calling for it to be doubled to 30 percent. Like the NDP, they oppose the Kinder Morgan oil pipeline project.

Signaling that the right-wing Liberals would have no

problem cooperating with the Greens, Clark has praised Weaver as a “collaborative” politician, while noting that she has worked successfully with him in the past.

An NDP-Green deal, whether in the form of a coalition or an NDP minority government propped up by the Greens, would not represent any alternative for working people.

Whatever the final election tally, workers in BC will be confronted with a big business government hostile to their interests. The fact that the Liberals could well end up serving a fifth term in power does not signify any enthusiasm for their right-wing agenda, but rather demonstrates the broad alienation from and hostility towards the NDP, which long ago shredded its reformist social-democratic program.

Horgan led a right-wing, nationalist campaign. This included pledges to implement protectionist tariffs and the whipping up of anti-immigrant sentiment by advocating the expansion of the Liberals’ foreign buyers’ tax on property purchases. Mimicking the “America First” rhetoric of Donald Trump, the NDP called for restrictions on the export of lumber from the province and a commitment to use only BC wood for government projects.

After 16 years in which public services have been slashed and billions handed out to the financial and corporate elite, the NDP’s proposals to increase social spending were paltry to say the least. Hogan pledged to balance the budget during the first three years of an NDP government and to maintain corporate tax rates well below the national average.

Under conditions where BC has the highest poverty rate among all of Canada’s provinces, at over 13 percent, and with the cost of living, especially for housing, spiraling out of control, the NDP offered virtually nothing to working people. Its \$10-a-day childcare program would not be fully implemented for a decade, and even then questions remain as to how it would be financed.

But beyond the NDP’s right-wing campaign, workers in BC saw no prospect of an NDP government reversing the brutal attacks the Liberals have enforced over the past 16 years. This is because the NDP and its allies in the trade union bureaucracy have played a critical role in smothering working class opposition to the Liberals’ drive to gut public services and siphon wealth from working people to the rich and super-rich.

The Liberals’ road to power in 2001 was paved by a decade of NDP governments during the 1990s that imposed social spending cuts and public sector wage “restraint.”

Over the past 16 years workers in BC have repeatedly challenged the austerity policies of the Liberal governments of Gordon Campbell and Christy Clark. Major strikes took place in 2003, 2004 and 2005, among ferry workers, hospital workers and teachers respectively, in opposition to job and service cuts.

In the case of the hospital workers, sympathy strikes broke out among forestry and public sector workers, and the movement threatened to develop into a frontal confrontation with the Liberal government. On the eve of a day of action, which the unions felt compelled to call so as to maintain control over the incipient worker rebellion, the leadership of the BC Federation of Labour announced a sell-out deal with the Liberals, under which thousands of jobs were contracted out, and called off the protest.

In 2005, the same year he was first elected, Horgan lined up with his NDP colleagues against more than 40,000 striking teachers, who were challenging education cuts and anti-strike legislation. After a BC court ruling upheld an anti-strike law and seized the teachers union’s assets so as to prevent teachers from receiving strike pay, Horgan, then the NDP’s education critic, enthused, “I’m hopeful that [Labour Minister] Mike De Jong will seize this opportunity. There is an opportunity to reach out to, and I think they’d get a positive response from the union leadership.”

Over the subsequent decade, the NDP and the unions sabotaged popular opposition to the Liberals, including instructing workers not to challenge the Liberals’ “zero net mandate” policy, under which any public sector pay increases had to be offset with concessions elsewhere. When another teachers’ strike broke out in the summer of 2014, the NDP’s union allies did all they could to contain and shut down the dispute. This culminated in Canadian Labour Congress President Hassan Yusuf helping Clark impose a sellout settlement, after ensuring her that the unions were not out to challenge her government.

The author also recommends :

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[6 May 2017]

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