

British Columbia NDP secures Greens' support to form minority government

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British Columbia New Democratic (NDP) and Green Parties have struck a deal to oust the province's 16-year-old Liberal government, which lost its legislative majority in last month's election, and to form a Green-backed, minority NDP government.

Between them the trade union-backed NDP and Greens have only one more seat than the Liberals (44 to 43) and likely will have to supply the speaker of the legislature. Thus it is not entirely certain that the NDP will be able to form the government, if, as expected, the legislature rejects the "Speech from the Throne" that the Liberals present when the provincial parliament convenes later this month.

Should a Green-supported NDP government come to office, it will be a big business government, which will in no way represent a genuine alternative to the austerity policies that successive Liberal governments have pursued since 2001.

The NDP-Green "Confidence and Supply Agreement" calls on the Greens to support an NDP government on all "confidence" motions, including budget votes, for the next four years, so long as the NDP pursues a defined series of "legislative and policy initiatives" and ensures that the three Green legislators are consulted and their views incorporated in "final decision-making."

Predictably, given NDP leader John Horgan's boast during the election campaign that his party's budgetary plan was based on that of the Liberals, the NDP-Green agreement in no way challenges the reactionary fiscal framework created by more than a decade-and-a-half of Liberal social spending and tax cuts.

The agreement includes vague commitments to invest in health care and education, but dollar figures are conspicuously absent. It makes no mention of the NDP's proposal for a minuscule increase in the corporate tax rate, from 11 to 12 percent—a proposal that the Greens oppose. Nor does the agreement call for any increase in taxation rates on the wealthy, although the Liberals repeatedly slashed the taxes of the richest British Columbians while starving public and social services of funding.

Apart from a few cosmetic changes like the establishment of a Minister for Mental Health and a few token pilot projects, the NDP-Green agreement calls, in effect, for the perpetuation of the status quo: health care, education, and the social services on which the poorest and most vulnerable sections of the population depend will continue to operate on austerity budgets.

The agreement does stipulate a series of environmental policy changes advocated by the Greens. These include further hikes in the province's regressive "carbon tax" and provincial government action to block the building of the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain, which would transport Alberta tar sands oil (i.e. bitumen) to the Port of Vancouver.

During the election campaign, the NDP stressed its commitment to "fiscal responsibility," pledging to deliver a balanced budget for its first three years in office. The Greens, meanwhile, attacked the NDP's meagre proposals for increased social spending from the right, denouncing them as lavish and "irresponsible."

When the Greens emerged from the May 9 election holding the "balance of power," they moved quickly to position themselves to make a deal with Premier Christy Clark and her Liberals. They tailored their demands to be acceptable to the Liberals and appointed Norman Spector, a former chief adviser to right-wing Social Credit Premier Bill Bennett and Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, as one of their chief negotiators.

Green Party leader Andrew Weaver had previously boasted of his collaboration with Clark, including his support for two Liberal austerity budgets. But he and the Green Party leadership were pushed in the direction of the NDP by a groundswell of opposition to cooperating with the Liberals among Green supporters, and a well-coordinated campaign by ostensibly "progressive" groups like LeadNow.

The NDP-Green agreement also waters down an NDP promise to eliminate Medical Service Plan premiums, a regressive tax which falls disproportionately on low-income earners. Whereas previously the NDP promised to eliminate MSP premiums over the next four years, now it is only

saying a commission should be appointed to study the issue.

The NDP promise to build 114,000 new social housing units over the next decade has also been scaled back. The NDP-Green agreement merely calls for measures to “make housing more affordable” by increasing the “supply of affordable housing” and for “action to deal with the speculation and fraud that is driving up prices.”

Both the NDP and Greens support expanding the Liberals’ reactionary “foreign buyer tax,” which incites hostility to immigrants and diverts attention away from the real cause of the housing crisis: the capitalist profit system. While they fulminate against “outsiders” for driving up housing prices, both the social democrats and Greens cover up the fact that the banks and other blue-chip Canadian investors have made billions in profits by feeding a speculative housing bubble that now threatens to collapse at the expense of working people.

The NDP-Green agreement also outlines a turn to economic protectionist measures that pit workers against each other. During the election campaign, the NDP vowed it would restrict lumber exports and impose conditions on government construction projects to ensure that they only use materials produced in BC. In its agreement with the Greens, the NDP is now committed to the formation of an “emerging economy task force” empowered to develop “Made in BC” business initiatives.

Under conditions in which BC has one of the lowest minimum wages in the country, at just \$10.75 an hour, the agreement calls for a commission to study the possibility of raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour by 2021. Such an increase, even were it to be enacted, would do little to alleviate the poverty crisis in major cities like Vancouver and Victoria, where the cost of living is among the highest anywhere in Canada.

The NDP-Green agreement also calls for a referendum in 2018 on adopting some form of proportional representation; the appointment of an independent investigator to examine the Site C dam project; the granting to the Greens of official party status in the legislature; and the outlawing of corporate and trade union donations to political parties.

The right-wing character of the NDP-Green agreement should come as no surprise. Whenever the NDP has held power at the provincial level over the past three decades, it has worked tirelessly to uphold the interests of big business at the expense of working people. In BC, Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba during the 1990s and 2000s, NDP governments came into bitter conflict with the working class by implementing austerity budgets that devastated public services and paved the way for the coming to power of openly right-wing governments, including the BC Liberals in 2001. During its 16 years on the opposition

benches, the BC NDP and its trade union allies did everything in their power to smother working-class opposition to the Liberals’ agenda, including by sabotaging strikes by ferry workers, hospital employees and teachers.

At the federal level, the NDP has followed a similar trajectory, supporting austerity and Canada’s participation in US-led wars in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa. In 2015, the federal NDP conducted a Harper-lite campaign based on balanced budgets, increased military spending, and a pledge not to increase the taxes of even the richest Canadians.

The coming to power of an NDP government in BC would nonetheless represent a major setback to Justin Trudeau’s Liberal government in Ottawa. Trudeau shares many of the BC Liberals’ legislative priorities and last year gave his government’s approval for the Kinder Morgan pipeline project.

Under their quasi coalition agreement, the BC NDP and Greens are committed to “immediately” employing “every tool available” to the provincial government to block the pipeline project, which would result in a substantial increase in oil tanker activity off the BC coast.

The pipeline issue also threatens to tear apart the NDP. In Alberta, the NDP government of Rachel Notley, which has gone out of its way to ingratiate itself with Big Oil since coming to power in 2015, fully endorses the push to build pipelines to tidewater. Notley responded to the NDP-Green agreement by declaring that the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain project would be built and all but calling on Trudeau to invoke rarely-used federal constitutional powers to force through transportation projects over provincial opposition.



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