

Backed by Greens, NDP to form British Columbia's government

Roger Jordan
8 July 2017

The trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP) has been tasked with forming the government in British Columbia, Canada's third most populous province, after NDP and Green Party legislators combined to vote non-confidence in Christy Clark's Liberal government last week.

On May 29, some three weeks after a provincial election had resulted in a hung parliament, the NDP and Greens struck a deal to replace BC's 16-year-old Liberal government with a Green-backed, minority NDP government.

Clark maneuvered for the next month in the hopes of hanging on to power. She delayed the recall of the legislature to late June, presented a Throne Speech which included some NDP and Green campaign promises, and, following the defeat of her government, tried to prevail on Lieutenant-Governor Judy Guichon to call a new election.

Although there is no Canadian precedent for dissolving a legislature so soon after its election, Clark claimed this was called for because the NDP-Green combination will be incapable of providing "stable government." The NDP took 41 seats in the May 9 provincial election and the Greens 3, meaning that combined they have 44 seats to the Liberals' 43. However, once a Speaker is supplied, the Green-backed, NDP government will have exactly the same number of seats as the Official Opposition Liberals. The Speaker is mandated to break tie votes, but according to convention is not supposed to change the status quo, which will make it difficult for the NDP to adopt all but money bills without Liberal support.

The Lieutenant Governor heard Clark out at an audience on June 29. But she then promptly called on NDP leader John Horgan to form the government. He is expected to be sworn in as premier in the latter part of July.

There is no doubt Guichon was carrying out the wishes of big business when she handed the reins of power to Horgan and his NDP. To do otherwise would have broken with parliamentary tradition and drawn attention to the sweeping arbitrary powers invested in the monarch and her representatives, the Governor General and provincial Lieutenant Governors. These powers have been retained in the hands of an unelected and unaccountable institution, so as to provide the ruling class with a fail-safe means of imposing its authority in a major crisis, not to save the career of one of its political hirelings.

Moreover, big business in BC and across Canada has long experience with the NDP, which like social-democratic parties the world over has renounced any commitment to social reform and supports austerity and war.

BC's first minority government in over six decades, the Horgan-led NDP will make at most minimal and mainly cosmetic changes to the austerity agenda of their Liberal predecessors. During the election campaign, Horgan boasted that his platform was based on the budget plan adopted by the Liberals, who for 16 years slashed public services, cut workers' real wages, and gave big business and the rich massive tax handouts.

The confidence and supply agreement hammered out between the NDP and Greens confirmed this. Many NDP election promises, including to build 114,000 housing units over the next decade and raise corporate taxes by a minuscule 1 percent, were either scaled back or totally abandoned. Horgan's pledges to do more to tackle the opioid crisis and to combat poverty are simply not credible given his commitment to a balanced budget for at least the first three years of NDP rule and to otherwise work within the reactionary fiscal framework laid down by the Liberals.

No doubt the NDP will point to pressure from the Greens to justify abandoning other promises. After Horgan made a speech vowing to make it easier for unions to win certification, Green leader Andrew Weaver said his party would ally with the Liberals to ensure the measure doesn't pass. During the election campaign, Weaver criticized the NDP's modest spending proposals as lavish and irresponsible and boasted about his ability to work closely with Clark and her Liberals. Following the election, the Greens signaled they would be willing to keep the Liberals in office under a deal similar to that they ultimately struck with the NDP, but backed down when they realized it would cost them much of their popular support.

Wherever the Greens have held power or propped up governments internationally, they have pursued reactionary pro-business policies. In Germany, the Greens participated in a coalition with the Social Democrats from 1998 to 2005 which gutted much of the country's social welfare system through a series of labour law "reforms," creating one of the largest low-wage sectors in Europe. The SPD-Green government also led

Germany into its first foreign military intervention since World War II, the NATO war on Yugoslavia. In Australia, the Greens helped prop up a pro-austerity and pro-war Labor government, including giving support to brutal, anti-refugee policies that have confined asylum-seekers to remote islands in the Pacific.

Anyone still harbouring illusions in the character of the incoming government would do well to examine the response of big business, which has been broadly supportive of the NDP's policy changes. Greg D'Avignon of the British Columbia Business Council has lauded the NDP-Green accord's call for an "emerging economy" task force, which will develop business strategies including protectionist "made in BC" regulations for government contracts, and for an innovation task force for the technology sector. Opposition, such as there is, from the business community has come from sections of the ruling elite, including in finance and energy, who fear the NDP-Green de facto coalition will make good on its promises to do everything in its power to block the expansion of the Kinder-Morgan oil-bitumen pipeline, fracking, and other environmentally destructive resource development projects like the Site C dam.

Whether the NDP-Green opposition to some or all these projects will continue remains to be seen. The Alberta NDP came to power in May 2015 as an avowed opponent of unrestricted pipeline and oil tar-sands development, including the Keystone XL project. Two years later, Premier Rachel Notley regularly argues in favour of pipelines, including during a trip to Washington earlier this year to lobby for the approval of the Keystone XL project. She has pledged to work closely with Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in forcing through the Kinder Morgan expansion over popular opposition. Angered by the BC NDP's stance, Notley barred Alberta NDP staffers from campaigning for the party in the BC elections.

Within hours of his being tasked with forming BC's government, Horgan held a friendly phone chat with Trudeau, the two men having apparently agreed to set aside discussion of the pipeline issue until they meet later this summer. Following their discussion, Horgan stressed his government will cooperate with Ottawa, including on the softwood lumber dispute with the United States.

Predictably, the trade unions and other so-called "left" organizations are doing their utmost to dress the incoming government in "progressive" colours. Time and again during the 16 years of Liberal rule, the unions scuttled militant strikes that had widespread popular support and the potential to spearhead a working-class offensive aimed at driving the Liberals from power.

The BC Federation of Labour, which poured vast sums into the NDP's election campaign, is hailing the creation of a "fair wage commission" as a great step forward and claiming that this will lead to the adoption of a \$15 minimum wage. As a matter of fact, the NDP-Green agreement provides no commitment to adopt such a measure. The commission is

merely tasked with examining the possibility of introducing a \$15 minimum wage by 2021. Even if this were enacted, it would do little for working people struggling to make ends meet in cities with exorbitant housing, food and other living costs, like Vancouver and Victoria.

In announcing its "critical support" for the NDP ahead of May's election, the International Socialists, who are aligned with the ISO in the United States, enthused that the BC NDP was "trying to move with the leftward swing in politics around the world."

In truth, the NDP, like its social democratic counterparts around the world, has moved so far to the right that it is virtually indistinguishable from the big business Liberals and Conservatives.

The enthusiasm of the unions and pseudo-left for the new government is bound up with their own privileged interests, which are separated by a vast social gulf from the concerns of working people. As well as offering BC's unions the opportunity to broaden their corporatist ties to big business and the state, including through positions on new committees and other consultative bodies, the NDP's assumption of power opens up career prospects for some of their leading personnel.

Horgan has appointed as his chief of staff Jeff Meggs, who was a prominent member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Canada (CPC) for over a decade. After breaking with the Stalinists in the late 1980s, Meggs became an NDP staffer. Later he helped initiate political cooperation between the Coalition of Progressive Electors (COPE), a "left" Vancouver municipal coalition with heavy CPC influence, and rightwing "modernizing" figures like current Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson as part of the Vision Vancouver alliance.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact