

British Columbia New Democrats win majority government buoyed by business, union support

Penny Smith, Roger Jordan
27 October 2020

British Columbia's trade union-backed New Democratic Party emerged the victor from Saturday's provincial election. With a half-million mail-in ballots still to count, provisional results give the New Democrats 55 of the 87 seats in the provincial legislature and 45 percent of the popular vote,

Premier John Horgan called the election seven months early with the aim of securing a parliamentary majority for the NDP, which came to power in 2017 at the head of a minority government thanks to a "confidence and supply agreement" with the Green Party.

This gambit paid off. The Liberals, who held power for 16 years beginning in 2001 and fell just one seat short of clinging to power in 2017, have been reduced to 29 seats, their worst result in a generation. The Greens took three seats, the same number as in 2017, and with a similar 15 percent vote-share.

The media is full of reports proclaiming an "historic" NDP victory. But Saturday's results were not the result of any groundswell of popular enthusiasm for the Horgan government, which has pursued pro-big business policies and formed a close partnership with the Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal government, while posturing as a "friend of working people."

At 52.4 percent, voter participation was the lowest in any BC election since records began to be kept in 1928.

The NDP victory is attributable to two factors: broad support from the establishment, including large sections of business that until recently railed against the NDP as "socialist," and widespread popular animosity toward the BC Liberals—a coalition of federal Conservatives and Liberals, and former Social Credit supporters—because of their long association with austerity.

In the lead-up to the election, Canada's "newspaper of record" and the traditional mouthpiece of the Bay Street financial elite, the *Globe and Mail*, published an editorial endorsing the re-election of the BC NDP government. It praised Horgan for having "governed well" and pledging to keep "a steady hand on the wheel" with a "plan of only modest increases in spending over the next few years" despite the health and socio-economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Yesterday, in a further editorial, the *Globe* again praised Horgan, calling him a "centrist on economic files" who has successfully parried Liberal attempts to paint him as "anti-development," but added the warning that the mounting social crisis means "his second term is going to be a lot tougher."

The NDP campaign trumpeted its supposed positive handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. "The last thing we should do now is go back to a government that puts the wealthy and well-connected before the needs of people," Horgan declared in a typical campaign appearance. "Putting people first has been at the heart of our pandemic response and it will continue to be if our team is re-elected."

This is a pack of lies. The Horgan government has been at the helm of the province's criminal response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has produced deaths in long-term care facilities, left homeless people and other vulnerable sections of society to fend for themselves, and has now triggered a mounting and potentially catastrophic "second wave" by recklessly pushing to reopen schools and businesses. In this it has had the full backing of the trade unions.

On March 16, when other provinces were adopting shelter-in-place policies, the BC NDP government refused to order a lockdown. British Columbia banned gatherings of over 50 people, but exempted a slew of vaguely defined "essential services," including the lucrative construction and mining sectors, subordinating workers' health to corporate profit.

When more than 100,000 furloughed and laid-off workers in the province were put onto federal emergency rations in the form of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit, the NDP topped it up with a meagre one-time payment of \$1,000. Meanwhile, it has offered billions in tax breaks and subsidies to the energy and infrastructure corporations.

With over 12,000 infections and more than 250 deaths recorded since the start of the pandemic, and more than 150 new COVID-19 cases now being reported daily, the NDP government has made clear it will not disrupt corporate profit-making with further social-distancing and lockdown measures. Nine months after the World Health Organization declared a global health emergency over COVID-19, testing in BC remains extremely limited, with authorities routinely failing to screen asymptomatic people, even if they have been exposed to virus.

In line with their political counterparts throughout the country and capitalist governments around the world, the BC New Democrats are implementing a reckless back-to-school policy forcing students and teachers to return to overcrowded and often poorly ventilated classrooms. Opposed by many teachers, parents

and students, this policy has already led to a rapid escalation in infections.

A majority of teachers have reported conditions in their school as either “completely inadequate” or “somewhat inadequate.” In the week prior to the election, over 800 parents across the province kept their kids home from school for a day to protest the disastrous conditions presided over by the NDP and its union allies.

Despite the deplorable conditions in senior care homes, and the long-known fact—well documented by the province’s chief medical officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry—that the low-paid, transient workforce employed by private long-term care facilities has contributed to the spread of COVID-19, Horgan has called the province’s combination of private care and public care providers a “healthy mix.”

Many people were misled into believing that when the BC NDP formed a minority government in 2017, it would put an end to the hated big business Liberals’ 16-year reign of austerity and ultra-low taxes for big business and the rich; reinvest in health care and education; and take steps to reduce what is one of the country’s highest child poverty rates.

However, Horgan made clear from the outset that this would not be the case. On taking power, he boasted that his government’s spending plans were based on the fiscal framework that had been laid down by its Liberal predecessors.

The BC premier has served as a close ally of the federal Liberal government, which has cut tens of billions from health-care transfers to the provinces, committed tens of billions to purchasing new fleets of warships and warplanes, and integrated Canada even more fully in the US military-strategic offensives against China and Russia.

The BC NDP government and its union allies were quick to endorse the deal Trudeau struck with the Trump administration to refashion the North American Free Trade Agreement so as to make it a more expressly US-dominated trade war bloc aimed at challenging the economic and geostrategic rivals of US and Canadian imperialism, above all China.

The NDP has also proven its readiness to deploy state repression against protests. In February, it was Horgan and the NDP who ordered militarized RCMP units to raid a protest camp set up by the Wet’suwet’en First Nation against the construction of the Coastal Gas Link pipeline across traditional Wet’suwet’en territory. Horgan infamously insisted that the “rule of law” needed “to prevail,” citing a BC Supreme Court decision that in December granted the company an injunction for unimpeded access to work sites.

Canada’s financial elite also knows that Horgan can be trusted to keep a tight rein on public spending. Since 2017, his government’s balanced budgets have helped produce a worsening of the opioid epidemic, rising homelessness and increasing social inequality. The NDP has built less than 3,000 new affordable housing units out of its much-touted 10-year goal of 114,000.

Since the outset of the pandemic, Horgan’s NDP colleagues in the federal parliament have stepped up their close cooperation with Trudeau’s Liberals. With the unions’ enthusiastic support, they ensured passage of the Liberal government’s September 23 Throne Speech, which pledged to enforce the reckless reopening

of the economy and offered state support to Canadian capitalism so it can remain “globally competitive” in a post-pandemic world.

The trade unions, which have responded to the greatest crisis of global capitalism since the 1930s by suppressing working-class opposition and deepening their corporatist ties with big business and the federal Liberals, joined with the *Globe* in calling for an NDP election victory in BC. Horgan is “the right leader to help navigate British Columbians through challenging times,” declared Unifor President Jerry Dias. A union release demagogically added that the NDP’s platform offers “a vision for BC’s future that leaves no one behind.”

The NDP’s BC Economic Recovery Plan tells a different story. The province brags that 250,000 jobs lost due to COVID-19 have been restored. However, there were more than 350,000 losses since the pandemic began. The unemployment rate in Metro Vancouver has climbed to 12.5 percent from 4.6 percent before the pandemic. Small businesses have been battered, as government aid packages have proven woefully inadequate. Since February, 8,000 have closed in Metro Vancouver alone.

Horgan is promising a Recovery Benefit Fund that would make available \$3 billion per year to build schools, hospitals and other capital projects. Included in the fund is a one-time rebate of \$1,000 for families and \$500 for individuals that would come from the price-gouging car insurance monopoly, ICBC, an obvious election bribe.

Even if these paltry commitments were made good on, they are a drop in the bucket.

Another main plank in the NDP election platform was more investment in building up Canada’s imperialist war machine. Horgan announced that a re-elected NDP government would subsidize the construction of Canada’s next Polar Icebreaker. Commissioned for the Navy and Coast Guard, the Polar Icebreakers were a key element in the National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy announced by federal Harper Conservative Party as part of its Canada First rearmament program. The government investment in the \$1.3 billion project “will keep BC shipyards modern and competitive,” claimed Horgan.



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