

Canada's social democrats seek to stave off parliamentary annihilation

By Keith Jones
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For the third federal election in a row, the trade union-based New Democratic Party (NDP) is in survival mode. Whether Canada's social democrats can win the 12 seats needed to retain official party status in the House of Commons is very much in doubt.

And, given the NDP's current level of popular support and the vicissitudes of the first-past-the-post electoral system, it is conceivable that the NDP, which held 19 seats at the end of the last parliament, could be eliminated from the Commons altogether.

A spate of opinion polls have placed popular support for the NDP at just 8 percent, 3 percentage points less than the 11 percent of the vote it captured in the 1997 federal election. These same polls indicate that the majority of the electorate, albeit to varying degrees, opposes the right-wing, tax-cutting agenda of the Liberals, Tories and Canadian Alliance and wants increased funding for health care and other public services.

The social democrats are attempting to appeal to this popular sentiment by promising to rescind parts of the Liberals' tax-cut package that benefit only upper-income earners and to allocate more of the projected federal budgetary surpluses to health care and other public services.

But the NDP's promises and its claims to represent working people cut little ice. Nor should they.

The NDP governments that came to power at the beginning of the last decade in Ontario, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan—provinces containing half of the Canadian population—promptly betrayed their reformist promises and imposed drastic social spending cuts.

Since 1995, the Ontario Tory government has spearheaded the big business offensive against the working class. But its path to power was paved by the Rae NDP government. Workers turned to the NDP in September 1990 to shield them from the impact of a gathering recession and the wave of corporate restructuring that accompanied the introduction of the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement. Instead, Premier Bob Rae junked his own program, declaring that there was no alternative to the capitalist market economy and its dictates. The Ontario NDP government slashed public spending, imposed a wage-cutting “social contract” on 1 million public sector workers, and laid the groundwork for the introduction of workfare. Even the Walkerton poisoned-water tragedy was in part prepared by the NDP when it partially privatized water testing.

The Saskatchewan and B.C. NDP governments have followed a like trajectory. In the process of becoming the first provincial government in Canada to eliminate its annual budget deficit, the Saskatchewan NDP regime closed more than 50 rural hospitals. Then last year, when nurses revolted against years of staff shortages and declining real wages, the NDP replied with draconian strikebreaking legislation. The B.C. NDP regime has slashed welfare benefits, cut the real wages of public sector workers and broken strikes.

As in Ontario, big business and the political right have exploited the confusion and anger amongst working people created by the Saskatchewan and B.C. NDP governments' policing of capitalist austerity.

The Reform Party/Canadian Alliance has all but eliminated the NDP as a contender in rural B.C. and Saskatchewan. In B.C., where a provincial election must be held by next spring, the opposition B.C. Liberal Party, running on a “radical” pro-investor, anti-union program patterned after that of the Alberta and Ontario Tories, enjoys a more than 30 percentage lead in the opinion polls.

By any measure the NDP has reached an advanced stage of political and organizational decomposition.

It has failed to win a single seat in Ontario, the country's most populous province and industrial heartland, in the last two federal elections. In last year's Ontario provincial election it won less than 13 percent of the popular vote (down 9 percentage points from the party's disastrous showing in 1995) and would have lost party status had the Tories not decided it was in their interests to give the Liberal Official Opposition a rival. Only once in four decades has the NDP won a seat in Quebec, the country's second largest and only majority French-speaking province. In this election, the NDP will largely ignore Ontario, Quebec, and all but a handful of ridings in its traditional Western base, to concentrate on trying to retain the seven seats it won in the Maritimes in 1997. Historically, the NDP has had little support in the three Maritime provinces outside industrial Cape Breton, but in the last federal election it became the vehicle for many Maritimers to vent their anger over the Liberals' social spending cuts, especially the dismantling of unemployment insurance.

Much of the NDP leadership, including the party's three provincial premiers, want Canada's social democrats to proudly proclaim themselves partisans of Tony Blair's Third Way. But others have warned that such a course, at least outside the three Western provinces in which the NDP plays the role of the “left” alternative in a two-party system, would result in the NDP's rapid elimination, since it would make the party indistinguishable from the Liberals.

The federal NDP long ago vetted its election propaganda of all references to nationalization or anything else that smacks of socialism. By comparison even with US presidential candidate Ralph Nader, the federal NDP's criticism of corporate power is tepid. In announcing the party election program, NDP officials were at pains to show that the proposed spending increases were all “costed” and vowed that were the NDP to take office it would not run a budget deficit.

Nonetheless, the federal party's demands for an immediate \$18 billion increase in public spending, the elimination of the capital gains tax exemption, and the restoration or imposition of new taxes on banks, corporations and the rich are viewed as something of an embarrassment by the “business-friendly” NDP provincial governments in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and B.C.. However, they have taken solace in the fact that the federal wing of the party is so far from power that even the press dismisses its program as a wish-list and not a true statement of the social democrats' intentions.

The height of the social democrats' ambition is that the Liberals will be deprived of a majority in Parliament and compelled to turn to the NDP to

sustain them in office. This is by no means a new orientation for the NDP. The perennial third party in federal politics from its founding in 1962 to the watershed election of 1993, the NDP and its backers in the trade union bureaucracy long promoted a vote for the NDP as a means of “keeping the Liberals honest.” Between 1972 and 1974, when the country was rocked by a wave of trade union and social struggles, the NDP maintained a Liberal minority government in power. The Liberals then used the populist credentials supplied them by the NDP to win back a majority and soon after launched the big business counteroffensive that continues to this day, by imposing three years of wage controls. (For their part, the NDP provincial governments of the day enforced Trudeau's wage controls in areas of provincial jurisdiction.)

The NDP's relations to the Liberals, the Canadian bourgeoisie's principal governing party over the last century, underscore that it is not and has never been a vehicle for fighting—in any way, shape or form—for a workers government. Rather the NDP has served as an instrument of the trade union bureaucracy for pressuring the Liberals and Tories for reforms and, most importantly, for heading off any genuine movement for independent working class political struggle.

Still, it is a measure of the social democrats' own sharp rightward evolution that today they should aspire to become the fifth wheel of a Chretien Liberal government, which has carried out the greatest social spending cuts in history and now with its tax cuts is ensuring that the rich and super-rich will appropriate a still greater share of the national income.

The NDP's marginalization and the parallel rise of the Reform Party/Canadian Alliance and the Harris Tories have prompted social democratic stalwarts to call for a radical rethink of the party's future, including whether the NDP should continue to exist.

Former Ontario Premier Bob Rae has repeatedly called for an alliance, if not an institutional realignment with the Liberals at the provincial level to defeat the Harris Tory government. The left, claims Rae, must recognize that Thatcher, Reagan and Mike Harris were right in challenging the welfare state. “Both Bill Clinton and Tony Blair succeeded,” wrote Rae recently, “because they were prepared to make welfare reform and tax cuts happen, because they understood that there were parts of the law-and-order issue that had to be addressed. They simply did not sustain the status quo.”

In September, Rae was joined in very demonstrative fashion by longtime Saskatchewan NDP Premier Roy Romanow. It is well-known that Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien tried to entice both Romanow and Rae to join his cabinet and stand as Liberals in the federal election. Ultimately, Romanow spurned Chretien's offer, announcing his retirement from active politics. But Romanow made clear that he refused to join the Liberals not because of fundamental political differences, but only because he wants to bring about a political realignment—an alliance or even a merger—between the Liberals and NDP. Romanow said he feared the realignment of the right round the Canadian Alliance. “Progressive-minded people on the center, center-left should be thinking about ... whether there's any common ground for merging and then advancing alternatives.” Such an orientation, he added, would require that the NDP divest itself of all vestiges of social-democratic/labour politics. “Class politics ... in the North American context doesn't work.”

Romanow's comments were quickly rejected by the federal NDP leadership, but only because they contend that the social democrats will have greater leverage over the Liberals if they remain in a separate organization. Signaling that the NDP intends to align with the Chretien Liberals in the event of a hung Parliament, federal party leader Alexa McDonough declared in replying to Romanow that discussion of the NDP allying with the Liberals to keep the Alliance from office is premature. “It is post-election talk. One can't rule anything in, or anything out, until Canadians have spoken.”

The truth is that recent years have seen not only a blurring of policy

differences between the Liberals and NDP but also of organizational distinctions.

The Saskatchewan NDP government has retained power since the September 1999 provincial election only because it is in a formal coalition with the Liberals, who hold the balance of power between the NDP and the Alliance-inspired Saskatchewan Party.

In January 1999, the B.C. NDP welcomed a former provincial Liberal Party leader, Gord Wilson, into its cabinet. Subsequently Wilson became the candidate of the International Woodworkers of America for the party leadership and premiership.

In the current federal campaign, the B.C. NDP government is openly backing the federal Liberals, except in the three B.C. seats where there are NDP incumbents. Premier Ujjal Dosanjh is brazen in working to secure support from the Chretien Liberals, no matter that they have formed the most right-wing federal government in more than a half century. “Provincially, for us to win the next election—for us to win any election—it's important for federal Liberal support to come our way in significant terms.”

The 14 month-old Manitoba NDP government is not under the same compulsions to support the federal Liberals. But it has moved to weaken the NDP's organizational ties to the unions, by passing legislation that bans all union financing of political parties.

Canadian Auto Workers President Buzz Hargrove, meanwhile, has said his union is so perturbed by the NDP's shift to the right that it is being forced to consider creating a new “labor party” that would revive the NDP's purportedly progressive traditions. Whether Hargrove, who is locked in a bitter jurisdictional dispute with the Canadian Labor Congress, actually intends to act on this threat remains to be seen. He made similar comments in 1994-95, after the Ontario NDP had suspended public sector workers' collective bargaining rights and rolled back their wages. Then in the last Ontario election he advocated in many ridings that workers cast a strategic vote for the Liberals, in a failed attempt to unseat the Harris government.

If the NDP has not yet come apart, it is largely because its warring factions fear that were they to go their separate ways they would condemn themselves to electoral oblivion. But the national-reformist perspective of the NDP, the claim that working people could be insulated from the inequities of capitalism through parliamentary reforms and collective bargaining, has been irrevocably shattered. Over the course of the past two decades the NDP and trade unions have been complicit in the big business assault on jobs, wages and public services.

This does not preclude that in this or a future election the NDP may suddenly become a lightning rod for working class opposition to big business. What above all characterizes contemporary electoral politics is extreme volatility and inchoate discontent.

The task of socialists, however, is clear: a new mass workers party must be built in opposition to the NDP and on an entirely different—socialist and internationalist—political perspective.

Significantly, the most conscious ruling class thinkers are nervous at the potential disappearance of the NDP. On October 28, Canada's most politically-influential daily, the *Globe and Mail*, carried an editorial that warned “critiques of capitalism are alive and thriving” and voiced the fear that such critiques may find a mass base of support. “Mass production,” declared the Thomson-owned *Globe*, “produced extraordinary profits, but created the conditions for resistance by bringing workers together under one roof. And what are the Internet and e-mail if not the shop floor of the 21st century?” A few days later, a second *Globe* editorial applauded the NDP's “resolutely socialist” alternative budget: “[T]he ‘otherness’ of the NDP vision reinvigorates public discussion ... hurrah to the NDP for being issue-different.”

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