

Canada: NDP frays over Mulcair's candidacy for party leader

By Carl Bronski
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As members of Canada's social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) prepare to select their new federal leader on Saturday, political pundits inside the party and in the country's mainstream press have characterized the race to replace Jack Layton, the deceased leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, as a burgeoning struggle between those defending "traditional" party values and those eager to denigrate them as "boilerplate."

Last week, former long-time federal party leader cum elder statesman, Ed Broadbent, launched an unprecedented public attack on the reputed front-runner, former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister Thomas Mulcair. In a series of television and newspaper interviews that clearly had been solicited by Broadbent, he accused Mulcair of various personal failings, such as being bad tempered and a poor team-player. More importantly, he cast doubt on Mulcair's recently minted credentials as a social democrat.

"Even though [Mulcair] has said he is going to try to bring the [political] middle to him," complained Broadbent, "he also has simply said we are going to modernize in ways that seem to indicate simply to become another Liberal party. And that would be, over a short period of time, the death of the NDP and everything it stood for."

Broadbent has aggressively touted for party establishment candidate Brian Topp, who appears to have slipped considerably since entering the race as an early front-runner last fall. Topp has warned of a possible "Blairite temptation" that could induce the party, as occurred in Great Britain with the advent of New Labour, to choose a right-wing figure as its new leader. As Topp recently told the *Toronto Star*, "What (Mulcair) is saying is that . . . the NDP needs, in effect, to adopt the agenda of our opponents. I think he's both wrong and taking us down a road that will not lead to victory. I reject the idea that our party needs to set aside its principles and its values in order to win. That's not true. As a practical matter, if there are two Liberal parties in front of the people of Canada in the next election, then people will vote for the real one."

But to what principles and values do Topp and Broadbent refer?

The elementary truth is that the NDP, which was founded a half-century ago by the Commonwealth Co-operative Federation and the Canadian Labor Congress, has never been a socialist party. From its very beginnings, it was a vehicle of the trade union bureaucracy and sections of small business and the middle class for pressuring big business and in particular the Liberal Party for reforms and for controlling the working class. It employed vague

socialist rhetoric to tie the working class to a nationalist reformist program predicated on subservience to the capitalist rule, while ruthlessly fighting to stamp out the influence of revolutionary Marxism. In the 1970s, when Canada was convulsed by social struggles, the NDP came into open conflict with the working class, policing Trudeau's wage controls in those provinces where it held office.

By the beginning of the 1980s, the bourgeoisie in Canada, as in all the advanced capitalist countries, repudiated once and for all the policy of social reform that it had pursued in the years of rapid economic expansion that followed World War II. The universal response of the unions and of social-democratic parties like the NDP to the bourgeoisie's turn to class war has been to repudiate their own reformist programs and serve as instruments for the assault on the working class, dismantling public services and imposing job and wage cuts.

In Australia, Britain, France, Germany, Spain and the other countries where social-democratic parties have held national office, they have served as the spearheads of ruling class offensives against the working class, often imposing wage-cutting "social contracts," social spending cuts, and privatization plans more sweeping than those implemented by the traditional right-wing parties.

There is no doubt that Mulcair seeks to move the NDP further to the right (see: "Canada: Front-runner for NDP leader considered joining Harper Conservatives"). But the trajectory he is following is that uniformly pursued by social-democratic parties around the world and which was championed by none other than the party's "sainted" late leader, Jack Layton.

On taking the party leadership in 2003, Layton charted a course toward making the NDP a party of "government," by proving to the Canadian ruling class that the NDP is a "moderate," "fiscally responsible," "progressive party"—that is, a right-wing bourgeois party. Under Layton's leadership, the NDP all but abandoned its timid appeals to the ruling class for increases in social spending and embraced their demands for a balanced budget.

On foreign policy, the NDP provided vital political cover for the Canadian bourgeoisie's eager participation in US-led military interventions in places as far-flung as Afghanistan, Haiti, and more recently Libya, in the hope of advancing its own predatory geopolitical interests and securing a share in the redistribution of the world's markets and resources through naked imperialist aggression.

In 2005, Layton struck a deal to keep in power a Liberal government that under Paul Martin and Jean Chretien had carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, then implemented massive tax cuts for big business and the rich. Three years later, Layton agreed to serve in a Liberal-led coalition government that was committed to implementing the Liberal-Conservative scheme to slash corporate taxes by a further \$50 billion and to waging war in Afghanistan for a further three years.

The NDP's platform for the 2011 federal election, as even the corporate media observed, differed little from that of the Liberals. Indeed, Layton, when questioned on the matter, agreed. The NDP program proposed no major social spending initiatives, nor measures to reduce social inequality, pledged to maintain the current record levels of military spending, and made a tax cut for small business the pivot of its plans for job creation. It elevated "hot button" policy planks normally associated with the Conservative Party—the hiring of more police officers, tougher prison sentences, etc.—to a central place in the NDP campaign.

Layton's response to the record support the NDP garnered in the 2011 election and its elevation to the status of Official Opposition was to step up his campaign to convince the ruling class that the social-democrats should be allowed to assume the role hitherto assigned to the Liberals, that is, to serve as its "left" party of government. This included a drive at last summer's national party convention to expunge the word "socialism" from the NDP constitution.

In all of these right-wing initiatives—including Layton's recruitment of the dissident Liberal Mulcair and his rapid promotion to the NDP front-bench—Broadbent and the current contenders for the NDP leadership concurred with Layton. And in the dying weeks of the leadership campaign, all of them continue to be completely complicit in the headlong shift of the NDP to the right that began decades ago and simply accelerated under Layton.

Topp, a longtime party backroom operative, was a key advisor to Saskatchewan NDP premier Roy Romanow, whose government imposed brutal social spending cuts. He was also one of the chief negotiators of the NDP's 2008 coalition deal with the Liberals and subsequently provided an inside account of the negotiations with a view to promoting the legitimacy of coalition politics. Last July, he voiced his support for the vicious austerity program imposed on the people of Greece by the banks and Greece's social-democratic government.

Paul Dewar highlights his spearheading of the NDP's parliamentary support for Harper's bombing of Libya. Nathan Cullen promotes a "business ethos" and an electoral alliance with the Liberals. Martin Singh, the owner of a chain of pharmacies, has been a stalking horse for the Mulcair campaign and has urged his supporters to vote for Mulcair once he is eliminated from the race. Peggy Nash, a former Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) negotiator, has fully supported the CAW's close alliance with Dalton McGuinty's Ontario Liberal government, as well as the abortive 2008 coalition deal with the Liberals.

The right-wing, pro-capitalist perspective of all the candidates in the leadership race has not prevented the rump of ex-middle class radicals who gravitate around the NDP from declaiming *à la*

Broadbent on the progressive character of NDP values and extolling on the potential various of them represent for "moving the NDP left."

The misnamed Socialist Caucus, whose leader is the longtime Pabloite Barry Weisleder, concedes that "none" of the seven candidates proposes a **clean break** with the pro-capitalist direction of the party" [emphasis added]. It then proceeds to provide all manner of arguments to endorse bottom-tier candidate Niki Ashton, including her youth, gender, and supposed "opposition to imperialist war." A 29-year-old Member of Parliament from northern Manitoba, Ashton has faithfully towed the NDP's line on all major questions since her election in 2008, including the abortive coalition with the Liberals and Canada's participation in the Libyan war. The sole exception was when she broke ranks to vote with the Harper Tories against the long-gun registry. Yet the Socialist Caucus proclaims Ashton "the best hope for progressive change in the NDP's top office," adding, "Frankly, we like Ashton's willingness to rock the boat."

The International Marxist Tendency-affiliated Fightback group is also plumping for Ashton. Like the Socialist Caucus, Fightback has to concede the obvious: all of the candidates uphold capitalism. But nonetheless it instruct its members and supporters to vote for Ashton and give secondary preferences to Nash, Topp, and Dewar, in that order, with a view towards defeating the "liberal Blairite faction" led by Mulcair. Fightback hastens to add, however, that in the event of a "Blairite" victory it will remain ever loyal to the NDP.

In their slavish support for social democracy (and the trade union bureaucracy), Fightback is no different than the whole gamut of fake left groups operating either inside the NDP or on its fringes. Under conditions of the greatest capitalist crisis since the Great Depression, they work systematically to uphold the political authority and legitimacy of the social democrats and the trade unions, claiming that, despite decades of abject betrayal, these enforcers of capitalist austerity and arch-defenders of the capitalist social order can be pressured into serving as instruments of working class struggle.

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