

British Columbia NDP wages right-wing, nationalist election campaign

By Riksen Stewart and Roger Jordan
6 May 2017

Just days ahead of British Columbia's May 9 provincial election, the trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP) holds a narrow lead in the opinion polls, suggesting that 16 years of Liberal rule over Canada's third most populous province could soon come to an end.

That the NDP has failed to establish a convincing lead over a deeply unpopular government seeking a fifth successive term in office is bound up with the party's right-wing, "austerity lite" policies and the alienation of workers from the pro-capitalist unions, which have systematically suppressed strikes and social opposition to Christy Clark's Liberal government.

The BC NDP is making only the most muted appeal to social discontent as it seeks to convince big business that it should be trusted with the reins of power. Under party leader John Horgan, the New Democrats are proposing only modest increases in social spending, after years of massive cuts to health care, education and other public services, and this in a province marked by high rates of poverty, a housing crisis, and rampant social inequality.

BC's rates of wealth and income inequality are the highest in all Canada. The bottom half of the population owns just three percent of the province's wealth, whereas the richest 10 percent of British Columbian possesses 56 percent or close to 20 times more.

In its 2013 election platform the NDP went out of its way to dampen expectations of substantive change, declaring "we have to be realistic about what can be achieved over a four-year term," and "we have been careful not to make too many promises." In 2017, the Horgan-led NDP has produced an even sparser platform.

Four years ago, when the NDP suffered an electoral debacle after leading the polls by 20 points going into the campaign, then party leader Adrian Dix pledged to raise corporate taxes by a paltry 2 percent, keeping them well below the Canadian average. This time around, Horgan is committing the party to a 1 percent increase. This would leave BC with the third lowest corporate tax rate in Canada and under conditions where corporate tax rates have been

reduced to unprecedentedly low levels. Moreover, Horgan and the NDP are actually proposing to increase venture capital and other tax credits for BC businesses.

The NDP says that it will raise the minimum wage from \$10.85 per hour to \$15 per hour, but only by 2021, by which time its value will be further eroded by inflation. A \$15 per hour minimum wage will hardly make a dent in BC's poverty rate, which due to the province's high cost of living is the second highest in Canada at 13.2 percent.

Horgan has taken every opportunity to proclaim his determination to uphold the interests of the ruling elite by enforcing strict "fiscal responsibility." The NDP says it will incur small deficits in the first two years in office, but will ensure the province returns to a balanced budget in its third year. Horgan has repeatedly sought to contrast his policies with those of previous NDP governments, which the big business media has long denounced for profligate social spending, although in reality they came into bitter conflict with working class. The NDP, Horgan declares, must learn to "live within our means."

None of this had prevented the Liberals, much of the corporate media, and a Toronto Dominion Bank report from denouncing the NDP for irresponsible social-spending promises. These right-wing attacks have been joined by the Greens, which secured their first seat in the provincial legislature when they captured a wealthy south Vancouver constituency in 2013. Green Party leader Andrew Weaver has refused to rule out propping up a minority Liberal government, a prospect which is a distinct possibility given that the Liberals and NDP are in a tight race and the Greens are polling around 20 percent of the vote.

Horgan's plan to "reduce the depth of poverty in BC" by raising income assistance (welfare) and disability rates by a meager \$100 per month amounts to a cruel joke! And the NDP is offering no meaningful measures to address the problems of young people, whether it comes to finding decent and secure jobs or pursuing higher education.

According to official figures, 13.2 percent of BC youth between the ages of 15 to 25 are out of work and the average

student debt-load is the highest in Canada at \$35,000. NDP promises to provide a \$1,000 completion grant and interest free loans for college graduates will do little to change this.

The bleak prospects facing BC's youth have contributed to an opiate drug crisis. There are close to 1000 overdose deaths annually in the province, far and away the highest number in Canada. The NDP's solution to the opiate drug crisis is simply to provide more naloxone kits and increase drug law enforcement.

BC's social and economic crisis is compounded by sky-high property prices, particularly in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland. Not only is home ownership out of reach for the vast majority of workers, soaring housing prices are driving up rents. The housing crisis is the product of decades of federal and provincial cuts to social housing budgets and the speculative activities of Canada's financial elite. The average price of a detached home in Vancouver has soared to above \$1 million, giving BC's metropolis some of the highest housing prices in the world.

The NDP has deliberately sought to obscure the responsibility of the capitalist profit system for the housing crisis. Instead, it has fomented xenophobia, and in particular anti-Chinese chauvinism, by fully endorsing the Liberal government's "foreign buyers' tax." Introduced last year, it imposes a 15 percent tax on property purchases by foreigners who don't reside in Canada. Horgan has stated he would not only retain this reactionary tax, but expand it by making it retroactive.

The NDP's right-wing, nationalist orientation is also evident in its economic policy. The NDP platform calls for increased export-tariffs on logging so as to encourage in-province milling and a provision paralleling Donald Trump's "Buy American" policy, which would require that BC-produced wood be used in government projects. This is part of a race to the right with the Liberals. Clark has pledged to ban thermal coal imports from the US in retaliation for the tariffs Washington recently slapped on Canadian softwood lumber exports.

The NDP's 2017 campaign election is entirely in keeping with the party's right-wing record. Time and again the NDP, working closely with the trade unions, has come forward to smother popular opposition to the austerity policies and anti-worker laws of avowedly rightwing Liberal and Social Credit governments and, when it has itself held office, it has legalized strikes and imposed cutbacks. Beginning with its refusal to support the Operation Solidarity strike movement in 1983, the NDP has worked systematically to demobilize worker opposition to public service and welfare cuts, wage and job cuts, and privatizations. The NDP governments of the 1990s paved the way for the coming to power of the Liberals in 2001 by

slashing public spending and public sector wages.

During the past 16 years of Liberal rule, the NDP and unions have repeatedly isolated and suppressed worker opposition to the Liberals' assault on public services. This included scuttling a 2004 illegal strike by hospital workers against concessions and massive jobs cuts and the 2005 and 2014 teacher strikes. In 2012, the unions urged BC workers not to take job action against the Liberals "zero net mandate," which required that any pay increases be offset by cuts elsewhere, claiming that improvements would come under an NDP government.

The NDP's right-wing campaign in BC mirrors the federal NDP's pro-austerity and pro-war agenda. Horgan's balanced budget mantra is taken straight from the playbook of the NDP's 2015 federal election campaign under Thomas Mulcair.

The NDP has backed every Canadian imperialist military intervention since the 1990s, from the NATO air war in Yugoslavia, to the Afghan War and the regime change operation in Libya. It has fully endorsed the Liberal government's support for NATO's aggressive moves against Russia, including the deployment of a Canadian-led "forward" deployed battalion in Latvia.

NDP provincial governments have implemented equally right-wing policies. The current Alberta NDP government has ensured a continuation of the low-tax environment for the oil barons and big business as a whole—the so-called "Alberta advantage"—while forcing the working class to bear the brunt of the economic crisis through job cuts, wage freezes, and social spending cuts.

So vociferous is the Alberta NDP in its defence of the interests of the major oil corporations that Premier Rachel Notley has banned all NDP staffers from crossing the mountains to assist the campaign of the BC NDP, because the latter is opposing the Alberta government-backed Kinder-Morgan oil pipeline expansion.

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