

# **The Federal Elections in Canada and the collapse of the social democratic NDP - Good Riddance and Old Quandaries**

Two Views from Quebec on the Canadian Federal Election

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The recent Canadian federal election results have taken most commentators and social activists by surprise. If the anti-Harper sentiment amongst two-thirds of the population had been clear enough for more than a year, very few had on their radar a Liberal majority outcome (even given the notoriety of the electoral distortions of the single-member plurality electoral system in Canada). The collapse of the social democratic NDP back to traditional base support levels in terms of the popular vote was equally unexpected.

Not surprisingly, post-election commentary has focused on how much the Liberals will depart from the core neoliberal framework of the Conservative government, although a huge number of small and symbolic gestures will be a breath of fresh air even if their meaning is not so certain. The ambiguities of Liberal governance are already manifest: Canadian bombing runs in Syria are to end while troop commitments on the ground are to be maintained and possibly increased; a highly public letter from PM-elect Justin Trudeau insisted on new relations with government workers, even while a small army of privatizers and consultants begins to huddle in Ottawa (having gained ample credentials under the Ontario Liberal governments at Queen's Park); and Parliament will apparently be hurried back to pass a tax cut and a modest increase in the intake of Syrian refugees.

The post-mortems on the NDP collapse have been many, ranging from indignation at the party's incompetent electoral strategy to the predictable critique of the never-ending NDP drift to the centre, which shook loose their electoral base and gave space to the Liberals to out-flank them on the left with a few high-profile policy gestures (even while the Liberals polish their credentials as the other party of the Canadian capitalist classes). The political strategy of running on the mantle of fiscal conservatism has now claimed three spectacular losses in a row in Ontario alone (the Olivia Chow mayoralty run in Toronto, the Andrea Horwath loss to the provincial Liberals, and now the federal election with its wipe-out of the NDP in Toronto). The recent BC and Nova Scotia defeats could be added to the discussion.

But the strategic orientation of the NDP to the political centre has been long in the making. More than one wag has traced this back to the 1956 Winnipeg Declaration and the formation of the 'New Party' in 1961. But the important breaks began under the leadership of Ed Broadbent and the tactics and strategies of a 'new realism' in response to free trade and the flood of neoliberal initiatives that began to emerge from the 1980s on. Although with few of the major political divisions that accommodate a new 'third way' politics in other social democratic parties, or the adoption of Blairite bluster, these politics established their hold on the party in its organization, platform and electoral strategy. The focus of the party apparatchiks, and most of the parliamentarist factions, was on dislodging the Liberals and becoming the northern version of the U.S. Democratic Party in occupying the centre as the left alternate party of government.

The leadership of Jack Layton gave the appearance, at times, of pushing the NDP toward a more progressive stance with the focus on the 'social economy' and 'greening jobs', but this really ended up being a 'third way from below' as the electoral strategy moved even more decisively toward the political centre, mobilizations with social movements all but abandoned.

With the radical left in Canada at its lowest organizational levels in decades and in complete disarray, apart from some of the capacities forming around Québec Solidaire, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that working class and progressive politics in Canada are at a major impasse with no clear direction in sight. There is the obvious imperative to build socialist organizational and political capacities, but few on the radical left in Canada are taking this seriously and moving beyond gestures without political commitment or resources.

The new Liberal government's specific promises of departure from the Harper regime will allow space for some campaigns to intensify their efforts, such as around the Canada Post cutbacks and childcare, while other Liberal government policies, such as around pipeline developments, open-ended support for Israel, and the Trans Pacific Partnership, will compel new mobilizations. If only for organizational needs, the NDP will go through some measure of internal evaluation to assess the degree of the election disaster. But it is completely illusory to expect anything other than a re-affirmation of the cautious social democracy to which the NDP has always adhered. The question is whether the anti-neoliberal and anti-austerity movements that have been forming new political organizations of the Left in other parts of the world will begin to find some echo in new campaigns and political breakthroughs in Canada.

The discussions of the election amongst the Left in English Canada have had few contributions to the debate from Quebec. Here *The Bullet* publishes in translation (by Richard Fidler) two contributions from leading activists in Quebec on the election, the end of the Harper government and the challenges for the left [see below].

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### **Two Views from Quebec on the Canadian Federal Election**

Roger Rashi, available on ESSF (article 36176), [Canada/Quebec: The Federal Elections and the Collapse of the Orange Wave - The NDP Was Sunk by its Turn to Austerity, Not the Niqab](#)

Pierre Beaudet, available on ESSF (article 36174), [Canada/Quebec: The federal elections and the NDP - Poor Player, Poor Loser](#)

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## **P.S.**

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<http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/1178.php>