

Responding to Donald Trump with a popular democratic project for Canada

A call for the Canadian left to take up the challenge of building a viable popular democratic project on the national scale

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The fractured and contradictory reaction by Canadian political and economic elites to Donald Trump's decision to impose a 25 percent tariff on Canadian imports and to make Canada the United States' 51st state has revealed the weakness of the country's fabric. The tenuous ties that once bound Canada's different nations, regions, and provinces, and provided it with a degree of coherence have been frayed by decades of neoliberal reforms. At one time, for example, Canada's elites could claim a relatively robust universal health care system as a source of domestic legitimacy and, incidentally, a point of differentiation with the US. Today, we see health care systems across the country pushed to the brink of collapse, ready to be privatized and delivered into the expectant hands of Canada's corporate giants. Superficially, this weakness was confirmed by a recent poll that indicated an overall decline in "deep attachment" and "pride" in Canada. Interestingly, it also found that older and wealthier Canadians were more likely to profess pride in Canada while the opposite was true for poorer and younger Canadians. This brings into relief the reality that more Canadians feel excluded from the national community and that this sentiment has a visible class dimension as well as an interrelated generational one.

The difficulties Canada's governing political parties and its economic elites are encountering in trying to cobble together a response to Trump's different threats, after having tried to cajole him with concessions, suggests that they do not have the domestic hegemonic resources to confront his threats head-on in a [unified](#) and coherent manner. This can be contrasted with Mexico's much more unequivocally [confrontational response](#) against any punitive policy enacted by the Trump administration. Mexico, incidentally, is helmed by a leftist president, Claudia Scheinbaum, who enjoys robust support from across that country's popular classes. Nevertheless, the challenges and contradictions Canadian elites will face in trying to either appease or confront Trump in the coming weeks, months, and years will provide opportunities for Canadian progressives, including socialists. It will open a space for the articulation of a popular democratic project at the national scale in opposition to increasing American domination as well as Canada's supine political and [economic elites](#).

Taking on such a project might, of course, generate discomfort among Canadian socialists as it would bring into focus the question of nationalism, and socialists have historically had an ambivalent if not antagonistic relationship with the nation and nationalism. Nationalism is perceived to run counter to socialism's commitment to internationalism and working class solidarity across borders. Moreover, elite conceptions of Canadian nationalism have in fact contradicted socialist values. On the one hand, the modern multicultural Canadian nationalism articulated by Trudeau *père* during the 1970s, which predominated until recently, sought to render the country's settler colonial project invisible, to subvert Québécois claims to self-determination, and to subsume class struggle by

centring the individual citizen. Further, the 2022 Convoy protests reinvigorated multicultural nationalism's main competitor: the more regressive British North American conceptions of Canadian nationhood juiced by conspiracy theories and an obsessive hatred of Trudeau *files*. In some cases, it paradoxically manifests itself in an allegiance to Trump. It is these more reactionary variants of nationalism that seem to be benefitting from growing alienation from the latter form as exemplified by growing support for Pierre Poilievre's Conservative Party among [younger](#) and [working class](#) voters.

Despite these developments, Canada remains a significant political entity, and Canadian socialists would do themselves and the broader international left a disservice by leaving its terrain uncontested. The unfolding climate catastrophe, growing inequality, the disintegration of the country's social safety net, and the rise of profoundly reactionary yet increasingly viable political forces at home and abroad make it imperative for Canadian socialists to develop strategies to begin to substantively challenge Canadian elites at the national scale. This nonetheless raises the question of whether a popular democratic project at the national level needs to be articulated in explicitly left nationalist terms that compete with multicultural and reactionary variants of Canadian nationalism over its symbols. While competing for concrete symbols such as the flag and common sense notions such as 'Canadian decency' may help to win over more centrist and even some left-leaning social forces—in the labour movement, for example—to a popular democratic project, these same symbols and tropes have also been used to oppress and silence other social forces.

At the risk of eliding this dilemma, it may be best to not pre-determine the degree to which existing national symbols could be integrated into a renewed popular democratic project. These questions may best be settled in practice. Usefully, however, there are principles and criteria found in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' more journalistic writings on nationalism that could help to orient the left and negotiate this dilemma in the elaboration of a popular democratic project. In considering whether the nationalist movements of their time were deserving of support, they assessed the extent to which these movements articulated positions of international reciprocity between nations as well as their commitment to programs of social reform. In light of these two criteria, a renewed popular democratic project would have to align itself with Indigenous and Québécois claims to self-determination, just as it would have to challenge Canadian imperialism abroad. Moreover, at a minimum it would have to seek to improve social conditions and qualitatively expand political participation.

Guiding principles for developing a popular democratic project

One of the weaknesses attributed to the socialist left has been its inability to fully understand and contend with nationalist political forces. In part, this weakness has been attributed to the [oft-repeated claim](#) that Marx and Engels failed to develop a satisfactory conception of the nation and nationalism. Indeed, some of their writings suggest that the nation and the sense of national belonging would dissipate with the integration and modernization of global markets as well as the advance of class struggle. What often gets neglected when discussing this matter, however, were their more journalistic and thus strategically prescriptive accounts of nationalism. Indeed, Mike Davis contended that these pieces constitute their "[lost theory](#)" of nationalism. Taken together, these writings may provide some guidance on how to begin to articulate a national, if not necessarily nationalistic, popular democratic political project that can be contrasted with the more exclusionary and chauvinistic accounts are currently on offer.

In her [Really Existing Nationalisms](#), Erica Benner explains that in their journalistic articles written in a strategic register, Marx and Engels did not put forward a substantive and historically-oriented

conception of the nation. Rather, theirs was a mediated and future-oriented one in which different social classes compete to confer their own aspirations on the nation. Hence, for them, the nation itself could be infused with popular democratic aspirations just as it could be infused with chauvinistic ones. Importantly, according to Benner, they also insisted that popular democratic conceptions of the nation could not be willed into existence ideationally. Instead, supporters of such a conception would have to confront a terrain shaped by the power relations of capitalism that were favourable to statist and/or chauvinistic conceptions of nationhood concordant with the interests of dominant classes, whether bourgeois or aristocratic. Therefore, confronting reactionary conceptions of the nation meant challenging and working through existing power relations, political arrangements, and symbols.

Additionally, Marx and Engels emphasized the relational and internationalist dimension of popular democratic conceptions of national struggle. In the [Communist Manifesto](#) they argued that the “struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie is at first a national struggle. The proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie.” They insisted nonetheless that the ends of such struggles need not be narrowly nationalistic. Given that capitalism operates internationally within and across national boundaries, class struggle in one state would impact struggles in others. For example, in a [speech](#) delivered to English Chartists on the Polish Uprising of 1830 against the Russian Empire, Marx explained that “Poland must be liberated not in Poland but in England. So you Chartists must not simply express pious wishes for the liberation of nations. Defeat your own internal enemies and you will then be able to pride yourselves on having defeated the entire old society.” Theirs was thus very much a relational account that emphasized the interrelationship between class exploitation and national domination across the global capitalist economy.

There were of course many shortcomings to what Marx and Engels wrote about the nation and nationalism, which I won't address here. Despite these limits, however, useful criteria for evaluating and building contemporary political movements can be extricated from their writings on the national question. For Benner, one of these criteria is international reciprocity. To be clear, they were generally referring to the oppression of some nations by others within single sovereign entities, whether empires or states, although, for them, the concept of reciprocity did not end at the borders of those entities. At a very basic level, Marx and Engels contended that the oppression of one nation by another was due to the internal capitalist social relations of a social formation. National oppression as such was not due to an abstract will to domination but, rather, class relations that structurally impelled some nations to oppress others and made other nations vulnerable to oppression. They argued further that national oppression was important in contributing to the power of reactionary regimes in oppressor nations by providing these regimes with surplus value, for one thing, but also by anchoring them in international alliances made up of reactionary social forces. These social forces, according to them, could thus support each other in quashing movements that sought to combat class exploitation in oppressor nations and/or resist national oppression. This is why Engels famously [affirmed](#) that a “nation cannot become free and at the same time continue to oppress other nations.” They thus evaluated nationalist causes on the basis of whether they sought the liberation of all peoples from class exploitation and all forms of oppression including national oppression, or whether they were more narrowly focused on asserting exclusionary conceptions of the nation as well as purely formal independence.

A second criterion that can be distilled from Marx and Engels' writings, according to Benner, is social reform. Given that the structural roots of national oppression are to be found within the class divisions generated by capitalism, national oppression and class exploitation could not be ended without addressing those very divisions. For instance, for Marx and Engels, national liberation was not merely a matter of expelling national oppressors, but also a matter of transforming the very

conditions that impel national oppression in the first place. Although expelling national oppressors was a worthwhile goal in itself, formal independence did not automatically imply full freedom from oppression and exploitation as long as capitalist social relations remained in place. Moreover, the persistence of these relations would render a nation vulnerable to future oppression. For them, altering these conditions thus involved social transformation in both oppressor and oppressed states by improving social conditions and expanding political participation. Articulating a reformist project as an intermediate program, moreover, could help such a project garner a broad base of support among social forces such as trade unions and social movements as well as develop international alliances with likeminded movements as part of a transitional program aimed at substantive economic and social transformation.

International reciprocity and social reform in the Canadian context

What emerges from these writings are principles that can help guide the development of a popular democratic project on the national scale in Canada given the sticky question of the country's complicated position. First, Canada can be understood to be subordinated to the American imperial state and capital. Now, this does not mean that the Canadian state and its leading fractions of capital are being dominated or oppressed by the United States against their own will, nor does it mean that these Canadian actors are unable to pursue their own imperial interests. Indeed, the Canadian state and its leading class fractions have been willing participants in contributing to the project of American Empire both at home and internationally, whether this involves implementing neoliberal austerity domestically or promoting trade liberalism via projects like the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) during the era of post-Cold War American hegemony—or, more recently, by joining the US in its bid to contain and compete with the People's Republic of China economically and geopolitically. What this subordination implies, rather, is that there are limits to carrying out projects of domestic social reform or pursuing an independent foreign policy that would run afoul of American imperial interests. Nevertheless, this subordination could certainly take on a more coercive form during Trump's second term should his government opt for that course.

Second, Canada can be understood as an oppressor nation both domestically, in the form of national oppression, and internationally in the form of imperialism. Canada's ongoing settler colonial project centred on disputing and denying Indigenous territorial claims so as to access natural resources through projects like the Trans-Mountain and Coastal GasLink pipelines as well as its administration of Indigenous life through the paternalistic *Indian Act* (1985) place it in a relationship of national oppression with Indigenous nations. At the same time, English Canada's history with French Canadians more broadly and francophone Québécois more narrowly constitutes a second axis of domestic national oppression. Likewise, from an international perspective, Canadian political elites have been willing participants in promoting the interests of US empire that are largely congruent with their own in fora such as the Organization of American States (OAS), in addition to promoting the economic interests of Canadian mining and investment capital in Latin America and Africa. There is some debate on how to analyze or name Canada's role as an oppressor nation overseas, but some scholars describe it as [secondary imperialism](#).

Consequently, the development of a renewed popular democratic project would require reconciling Canada's combined dynamics of subordination to American Empire, internal national oppression, and imperialism overseas with Marx and Engels' criteria of social reform and international reciprocity. In view of this, it is important to reemphasize the argument that national oppression and imperialism are largely structurally propelled by class divisions within social formations. Not everyone in Canada has benefitted equally from the country's subordination to the imperatives of US Empire over the last few decades. In fact, that subordinate position has predominantly benefitted

different fractions of Canadian capital as well as fractions of foreign capital operating within Canada. However, the consequences of this subordination have been highly uneven for subordinate classes from a material perspective and highly detrimental from a political one with respect to left-wing politics. Although some segments of the Canadian working class benefitted at times from high commodity prices, others, especially those associated with [manufacturing](#), were either impacted negatively or negligibly. Real wages, moreover, have largely remained stagnant in the last few decades, with a high variability across sectors. Importantly, when it comes to the political weight and orientation of labour, it is important to note that [unionization rates](#) in the private sector declined significantly since the early 1980s, especially among men, which has left them more open to reactionary discourses and recruitment by conservative parties.

In view of these dynamics, articulating a popular democratic project centred on social reform that seeks to substantively improve social conditions would challenge the power of Canadian and foreign fractions of capital operating within Canada. It would also expand the scope for social and political reform as well as the political base for resisting Canada's ongoing subordination within the American imperial fold. In other words, it would provide a more robust coalition of social forces willing and able to resist the coercive domination being proposed by Trump. Challenging domestic and foreign capital domestically would also provide more leeway to elaborate a more autonomous foreign policy, one that would deviate from the priorities of American empire as well as Canada's own imperial interests. This is where the criteria of social reform can be connected to international reciprocity as assembling such a coalition would require strong coalitions and alliances domestically and internationally.

For instance, supporting claims of Indigenous self-determination within Canada in line with the criteria of international reciprocity would also challenge the interests of Canadian [mining](#) and financial capital. Any possibility of social and political transformation will be severely constrained as long as Canadian capital is able to extract natural resources under the cover of the Canadian state's settler colonial project. Canadian mining and finance capital have been pivotal in the adoption of neoliberal policies as well as in undermining the quality and functioning of liberal democracy at the federal level and across provinces. Challenging these fractions of capital domestically would also have an impact on Canada's imperial role as these groups often comprise the same companies, or have strong links with them, that operate in Latin American and Africa. This would provide grounds for solidarity with Indigenous nations located in Canada as well as with social movements in Latin America and Africa that have been combatting those fractions of Canadian capital in their own countries.

In terms of international reciprocity with Québec, projects of substantive social reform in the province will also require taking on fractions of capital that operate there as well as in the rest of the country. As Andrea Levy and André Frappier argue, such a [project](#) would involve not only transforming the Québec provincial state, but also the Canadian federal one. The movement for national liberation in Québec would have to look beyond a narrow nationalist perspective and join with political forces in the rest of Canada as well as with Indigenous nations in building an anti-imperialist alliance that would challenge the imperialist role of the Canadian state domestically and internationally. Critically, as Frappier and Levy point out such an alliance would have to rest upon a mutual recognition of the right of national self-determination.

Popular democratic projects and the Canadian context

Historically, there have been attempts to assert popular democratic conceptions of the nation generally framed as left nationalism. For example, in its 1933 [Regina Manifesto](#), the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) argued that its goal was to establish a co-operative commonwealth which would allow for "genuine self-government, based upon economic equality." Despite asserting

that it did not want to interfere with the “cultural rights” of minorities, it also called for giving the national government more power to control national economic development. This emphasis on centralizing power in the hands of the federal government and economic development placed the CCF as well as its successor, the NDP, in a difficult relationship with the Québécois aspiration to self-determination. Moreover, provincial CCF and NDP governments often pursued programs of resource extraction and economic modernization that furthered the settler colonial project in relation to Indigenous nations. One need only look, for example, at the confrontation between the British Columbia NDP government and Indigenous nations over the [Site C hydroelectric dam project](#) that flooded their traditional territories. The predominant social democratic conception of Canadian left nationalism can thus be said to have been lacking when it comes to inter-national reciprocity within Canada.

When it comes to the criteria of social reform, the legislative achievements of CCF and NDP governments at the provincial level should not be summarily dismissed. Indeed, it was a CCF government in Saskatchewan that pioneered the country’s first comprehensive public health insurance plan in 1961, which, of course, played no small role in the later passage of the *Canada Health Act* by the federal government. Another example of significant social reform is [Dave Barrett’s NDP government in BC](#) (1972-75) that gave public sector employees full bargaining rights, increased the minimum wage as well as welfare rates, among other things. It is also important to remember that there are NDP members across the country who are involved in grassroots social movements in their communities as well as labour unions. That said, it remains unclear the degree to which the federal sections of the party or its provincial ones remain committed to a substantive program of social reform that would significantly challenge the interests of Canadian and foreign fractions of capital. At the very least, it is not a matter of controversy to assert that the NDP has long departed from commitments to social reform outlined in the CCF’s Regina Manifesto.

Further, although Jagmeet Singh has called for a [more confrontational response](#) to Trump’s various threats than the one proffered by the federal government to date, a provincial NDP premier has called on the federal government to [boost its military spending](#) more quickly to meet its NATO target in a bid to assuage the incoming president. In sum, the NDP has not differentiated itself overmuch from Canada’s other political parties on how to react to Trump. In view of this and the timidity of the legislative agendas of its different sections across the country, we have to ask whether the NDP, as presently constituted, would be willing or able to develop and lead a popular democratic project with broad support to contend with the threats posed by the incoming US presidential administration as well as deal with such threats such as the unfolding climate catastrophe, growing income inequality, or the housing crisis in Canada and beyond.

There have been several historical interventions within the NDP that sought to point it in a more popular democratic dimension. Perhaps the most significant iteration of left nationalism in English Canada that bears mentioning emerged with the Waffle, the organized left-wing fraction within the NDP that was formed in the late 1960s and lasted into the 1970s. Of import, the Waffle viewed Canada as being under the imperial domination of the United States. Its [manifesto](#) (1969) argued that: “The major issue of our times is not national unity but national survival, and the fundamental threat is external, not internal.” In view of this, it maintained that socialism was the only way to pursue the country’s independence *vis-à-vis* the American Empire. The manifesto explained that “Canadian nationalism is a relevant force on which to build to the extent that it is anti-imperialist.” Moreover, the Waffle was vocal and clear in [recognizing Québec’s right to self-determination](#) which led to a confrontation with the party’s leadership.

In addition to its stated commitment to substantial social reform, the Waffle’s recognition of Québec’s right to self-determination demonstrated that it was aware of the need to incorporate international reciprocity into its “left nationalist” project when it came to national projects within

Canada. However, as some of its [own leaders](#) later acknowledged, it was largely silent when it came to Indigenous matters and neglected how Canada itself may have been dominated economically by the United States while at the same time contributing to and benefitting from the American imperial project overseas especially in Latin America. In other words, its anti-imperialism was largely framed against American empire and presented Canada as a victim of oppression without fully accounting for how the Canadian state itself participated in national oppression domestically in relation to Indigenous nations and imperialism overseas.

The New Politics Initiative (NPI) of the early 2000s can perhaps be seen as a second attempt to move the NDP in a more popular democratic direction. In contrast with the Waffle, the NPI was not conceived as an explicitly left nationalist project. It did, however, represent an attempt to articulate a popular democratic project of sorts. As part of the NDP “renewal process” of that period, the [NPI’s supporters](#) sought to halt the NDP’s drift to the centre. The NPI also sought to harness the rise of the nascent anti-globalization movement of the time to reconnect it with grassroots social movements by emphasizing the importance of “social change activism and participatory democracy.” It promoted an agenda of social reform that, among other things, promised to reinvest in public services and to confront the “increased power of corporations.”

With respect to international reciprocity the NPI was quite direct in [recognizing Québec’s right to self-determination](#) as well as its right to administer its own social programs. When it came to Indigenous self-determination, there was some language referring to the need to achieve “justice for First Nations” in one of its [discussion papers](#), but the issue did not appear to be a key priority. Moreover, its documents were quite silent on the matter of Canadian imperialism. In a way that was consistent with the anti-globalization politics of that period it emphasized the role of intergovernmental institutions like the WTO and the IMF in promoting “global corporate capitalism” while recognizing the role of individual states in establishing them. However, despite calling for “radical internationalism” there was no specific mention of the role of Canadian imperialism in promoting that agenda as well as its imperialist activities overseas. In the end, despite the best efforts of its supporters, the NPI initiative was [roundly defeated](#) by being voted down by delegates at a 2001 NDP special convention.

The NDP’s move away from substantive social reform and international reciprocity suggests that, on its own, the party will not unilaterally take on a popular democratic project. Moreover, the experiences of the Waffle and NPI indicate that trying to articulate such a project solely through the NDP by transforming it from within would likely end in defeat. Nevertheless, a popular democratic project, whether or not it would involve creating a political alternative to the NDP, would have to find a way to constructively engage with the party and, more importantly, its grassroots activists across the country. For better or worse, the NDP remains one of the few progressive forces along with trade unions that has a pan-Canadian organizational infrastructure.

These past experiences raise the challenging question of what a popular democratic project might look like concretely in the present conjuncture and of what tangible first step(s) could be taken to build such project. To begin, it might be useful to address what such a project might or might not be. Such a project would best be conceived as a strategic orientation as opposed to a defined program of policies to be carried out by a pre-determined political actor (such as a new political party). This orientation could serve as a strategic rallying point to federate progressives and socialists across the country, who could then hammer out a common project aimed at challenging municipal, provincial, and national power structures based on the guiding principles of international reciprocity and substantive social reform. It would not initially require the formal endorsement of entire organizations, such as trade unions and NGOs, but to be at all viable the project would ultimately have to draw activists from across social movements, trade unions, and existing political parties.

Organizing a meeting or a series of meetings centered on building a popular democratic project on the national scale might constitute an achievable first step. There is a relatively recent precedent here in the form of the meetings that took place across the country in the lead up to the [People's Social Forum](#) in Ottawa in 2014 that brought together representatives of the Québec left, the left in English Canada, and Indigenous nations. To be clear, these meetings did not lead to the articulation of a pan-Canadian popular democratic project in terms of a concrete program and lasting formal institutions. However, the further deterioration of social, economic, and political conditions in Canada as well as the threats emanating from the United States since then may mean that there is more of an appetite for such a more formal and lasting project. Discussions as to the specific institutional form a popular democratic project should take—for example, whether such a project would be parliamentary in addition to being extra-parliamentary, or whether it would require the creation of a new political party—could be debated and decided as part of such an initiative.

Conclusion

The Canadian left finds itself on the edge of a precipice: unless it takes up the challenge of building a viable popular democratic project on the national scale, it will continue to weaken in the face of increasingly powerful domestic and international reactionary forces. If it opts for the latter, it will not be able to continue to count on the formal legal protections of liberal democracy, however limited, as they continue to be undermined. The reality is that many of the basic functions of the Canadian political system rely on [unwritten conventions](#) and intra-elite norms make it particularly vulnerable to a Canadian right that is increasingly unscrupulous and authoritarian. The conditions for social movement struggle (legal protections, for example) at the grassroots level across the country will thus continue to deteriorate just as social, political, and economic conditions will continue to worsen. Canada, moreover, would thus be rendered ever more vulnerable to the sort of threats levelled by Trump these last few months.

The idea of building a new popular democratic project on a national scale may generate some reticence among Canadian progressives and socialists for whom it could call to mind more reactionary forms of nationalism that are entwined with the country's settler colonial project. However a popular democratic project need not be conceived as a nationalist project in a way that repeats the mistakes of the past, nor does it have to take on existing national symbols that are exclusionary or compromised in a wholesale manner. A popular democratic project guided by social reform and international reciprocity can be aligned with Québécois and Indigenous claims for national self-determination just as it can be anti-imperialist. Such a project can be and needs to be aligned with socialist values.

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