

Canadian Election Aftermath: New Actors, Same Play?

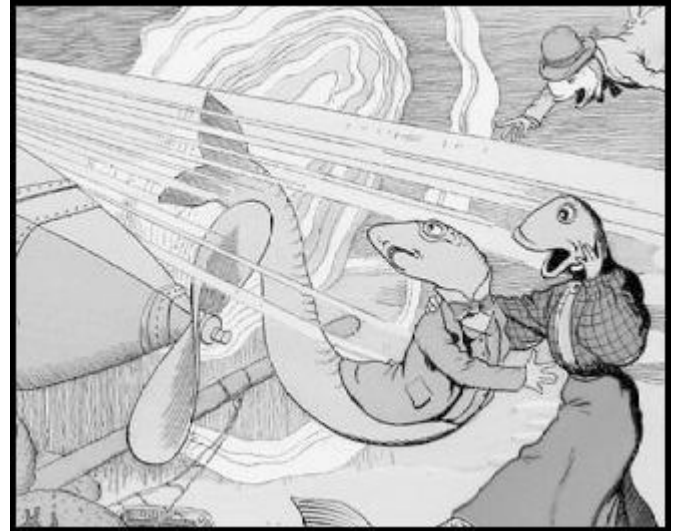
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The more things change, the more they remain the same. This commonplace statement contains more than a little truth of what liberal democracy has become in Canada today. The daily political discourse might adopt a ‘compassionate conservatism,’ a ‘social liberalism’ or even a social democratic ‘third way,’ although all the parties agree that the benefits of globalization are beyond contesting. A policy might shift here and there in re-regulating, say, the electricity sector while still privatizing energy production and distribution. More accountable scrutiny of judicial appointments to the Supreme Court by elected representatives might be advanced, even as Canadian troops enter into combat roles in Afghanistan without even a Parliamentary resolution being put to debate. The all-party consensus on free trade, a more regressive tax system, a ‘market-friendly’ public sector, the necessity of Canadian support for the U.S. ‘long war’ in the Middle East, and a national ‘law, order and security’ agenda safely insulates the critical issues of the day from the damage that might result from subjecting them to democratic debate. Governments rotate between political parties: neoliberalism continues on.

MINORITY PARLIAMENT ENCORE

The Canadian Federal election of January 23, 2006 to form the 39th Parliament had all these liberal democratic markings. In a suspenseful evening vote on November 28, the minority Liberal government of Paul Martin fell. Then, in a dramatic turn in the course of the campaign, the Conservative Party under the leadership of Alberta based Stephen Harper suddenly surged into a lead in the polls of some 10%, after consistently lagging the Liberals for several years. Aided by continual Liberal corruption scandals, the political incoherence of the Martin campaign, and the populist message of ending the arrogance and insider dealings of Ottawa under the Liberals, the Conservative campaign gained traction. Most surprisingly, nationalist Québec voters began shifting preference to the Conservatives, though they held no seats in the province and could hardly claim a political organization. With the New Democratic Party (NDP) and the Bloc Québécois (BQ) vote largely moving sideways, this was enough to return a Conservative minority of 124 seats and a 36% vote share, with the Liberals holding 103 seats and 30% vote, and the rest of the 308 seats split among the BQ (51), the NDP (29) and an independent. In a truly exceptional display of Canadian ambiguity, a change of government to punish the Liberals was delivered without a decisive verdict for a new political direction.

Alternating the Conservatives for the Liberals returned the unstable division of the prior Parliament. The Conservatives cannot fashion a stable majority with either the Liberals or the NDP:



the Liberals remain the alternate governing party and a critical vehicle for accessing power for a range of professional elites, and the NDP would be signing its own death warrant by undercutting any reason to support them as an opposition to the Right. And the BQ as a sovereigntist party has no interest in governing federally. Indeed, the Conservatives and the BQ will reach a compromise only over specific pieces of legislation where there is agreement on what they don't want the Federal government doing. In essence, different reasons to support, on the one hand, decentralist measures, and, on the other, stronger economic ties with the USA: for the one, on the basis of the free market faith, and for the other, in the desire to build greater political independence for Québec.

NATIONAL PROJECT

The divisions of Parliament, in turn, reflect the uneven balance of social forces across the country. Since the early 1980s and the failed nationalist turn of the governments of Pierre Trudeau, the combination of political fragmentation and neoliberalism has dominated the political landscape. The ruling classes have lacked any clear national project other than securing market access to the U.S. via NAFTA and other measures to deepen institutional linkages between the two countries. No political party has subsequently been able to act as an integrative political force, and regional fragmentations of economic and political interests have fractured into the regional basis of the various parties. Indeed, the interest of the ‘nation’ has become equivalent to ‘Canadian competitiveness’, as fused into the interests of regional capitalist classes. Neoliberal

economic policies and NAFTA have played opposite roles but with the same consequence: the former has gutted social policy capacities in Ottawa and downloaded programme spending to provincial governments, while the latter has served to strengthen the capacity of the national state to reinforce the free market principles of the trade agreement. The failure to address Canada's internal national questions in terms of Québec and the Aboriginal peoples has added to the disrepute of the national government and the political inability to forge any alternate agenda. The parliamentary impasse reflects deep-seated political divisions and the particular features of Canadian capitalism.

In this balance of social forces, it is political 'negativity' that dominates: the failed and undemocratic constitution of Canada cannot be addressed; new initiatives can be vetoed by one or another region of Canada; national social programmes and public institutions can be dismantled, off-loaded or simply allowed to wither but not developed; and the ruling classes can deepen the integration with the U.S. militarily and economically through the weight of events and the internationalisation of Canadian capital without constraint.

The initial policy agenda of the Harper regime is consistent, then, with the Canadian variety of neoliberalism. Harper's declared five priorities fits the agenda: a cut in the Goods and Services Tax (GST); increased accountability of ministerial spending; tougher criminal sentencing; a market-based childcare system left to the provinces to determine; and a cut in healthcare wait-times through more flexible provincial funding systems. Beyond these lie increased military spending and commitment of Canadian troops overseas, and closer trade ties with the USA. At the centre of these proposals are the same contradictions of George Bush's economic policy: tax cuts set against increased spending rubbing against adequate public services. This is the longstanding tactic of neoliberalism of strangulating non-market provision of incomes and services and expanding the capitalist sector.

Harper's selection of cabinet ministers tilts in the direction of both seasoned and hardened neoliberals. It is seasoned to try to gain a quick handle on the bureaucracy, to negotiate with the provinces, and to help stick-handle through some of the controversies over gay marriage and other issues of social conservatism. It is hardened because of the desire to crack open some of the last vestiges of universalism of the Canadian welfare state, particularly around access to healthcare, and to deepen integration with the U.S. in trade, energy, military and security matters.

LEFT DILEMMAS

The election itself, and subsequent strategizing about opposition to the Harper government, revealed many of the dilemmas facing the Canadian Left. Despite the NDP seat totals rising from 19 seats in the 2004 election to 29 seats in this Parliament, the percentage of the popular vote budged by only about 2 points to 17.5%, although this was Jack Layton's second electoral run as leader. A few brighter faces will appear on the benches, notably Olivia Chow and Peggy Nash in Toronto and via a strengthened BC caucus; but none represents any new departure in policy or politics. Indeed, the most striking thing about the NDP election

campaign was how thoroughly the 'third way' modernizers on the right of the party, who have gone by the names of NDP-Progress or the 'Pink Paper' group in varied incarnations in the past, have gotten their way under Layton.

The predominant discourse Layton and NDP political advertising adopted, in directing their political attack primarily at the Liberals and Martin, was one of being more 'sincere,' more 'business-like, and ready to get things done,' more 'accountable to Parliament,' and so forth. This allowed the NDP to be consistently out-flanked by the Conservative's more populist message of pitting the 'average Canadian taxpayer' against the 'vested big interests' being defended by the Liberal Party. Harper and the Conservatives consistently sounded more radical (and they are from the Right) than Layton and the NDP. This electoral tack was consistent with Layton and the NDP's attempt to recast the party as a post-labour, pro-green alliance of urban progressives. Its impact is certainly further to confuse and disorganize, such as they are, working class identities in Canada.

The NDP policy platform delivered even more disorder to the Left. It was, perhaps, the most right-wing set of policies that a social democratic party in Canada, at whatever level of government, has at yet run on. In a series of high-profile media events during the election, the NDP systematically let it be known they were moving even further to the centre and openly embracing the market: with a Bay Street economist turned NDP candidate in hand, a pledge was made for no new taxes; Harper was given a more or less free ride on his proposed GST cuts; Layton came around to endorse the Clarity Act, an act bitterly opposed by the majority in Québec as an infringement on their right to self-determination; the all-party consensus left largely unmentioned Canadian foreign interventions in Haiti and Afghanistan; increased military spending was endorsed; the embargo on speaking out against NAFTA was maintained; Layton signalled a willingness to consider greater market-based delivery of health services; and, in the final nail in the coffin of the NDP's moral standing, a tough law and order platform endorsed mandatory minimum sentencing for youth convicted of gun violence. The party put forward a defensible set of proposals around the issues of daycare, ecology and agriculture, but it is difficult to find much else that was daring, innovative or principled in the way of alternatives to neoliberalism. The electoral platform clearly put paid to the notion that some have still kept (all the evidence of NDP governments at the provincial level to the contrary) that Canadian social democrats had insulated themselves from the more free market-oriented policy realignment that Western European social democracy had long undertaken. From out of the shadows, the 'third way' made a most public debut during the election.

The furore generated over 'strategic voting' needs to be put in this context. The call for a vote for either the Liberals or the NDP depending upon which party in each riding had the best chance to defeat the Conservatives became particularly associated with the campaign interventions of Buzz Hargrove and the CAW. The controversy was further stirred by the embarrassing 'jacket-gate' hug by Hargrove of Liberal Prime Minister Martin at the CAW national convention in December. It is certainly true that the Liberals and the Conservatives are parties of the →

ruling classes of Canada, and the NDP sustains its social democratic heritage in maintaining a greater base in unions and workers. With no other electoral options in English Canada (as in Québec the Bloc Québécois merits support from the left), it is relatively straightforward to call for an NDP vote. But it has to be noted that this is not a critical issue of avoiding a ‘class against class’ sectarian turn of isolating social democrats or of maintaining an oppositional bloc built around unions and workers to capitalist markets. An NDP vote no longer plays the same role in class formation it once did. The NDP in government, and as a party through its policy shifts and organizational restructuring, also plays an active role in disorganizing the class. The NDP is now a centrist party of power and pragmatism. A vote for the NDP may be a principle, but it ultimately is also one of pragmatism. Both the advocates of strategic voting and the NDP were forwarding different means to achieve the same desired outcome of an NDP-Liberal alliance in a minority Parliament. Hargrove and Layton both consistently made grandiose claims about how fruitful this had been under the Liberal minority government.

At the end of it all, all the heat generated by the strategic voting debate misses the pivotal development that the left needs to account for. The federal NDP has been remaking itself under Layton in an attempt to forge a new long-term centre-centre alliance with the Liberals in opposition to the Conservatives. This includes the distant hope of reproducing the two party system that the NDP has forged in Western Canada, with the NDP emerging as the centrist alternative. This overriding strategic objective will form the backdrop to the jockeying between the Liberals and the NDP as the ‘little Caesars’ of Parliament calibrate their support or opposition to Conservative initiatives as to when to attempt to bring down the government. Other than the search for power and electoral advantage, it is anything but clear what point of principle the opposition forces will fight on given the degree of programmatic convergence and consensus during the election.

Against this centre-centre realignment of parliamentary and party political forces in Canada, the social movements lacked any significant mobilization during the election. Their capacities after the election for resistance to a hyper neoliberal government of Stephen Harper are quite unclear. The unions put out a number of election information kits for members, but offered little in the way of a sustained campaign. In a post-election assessment, CLC President Ken Georgetti went so far as to claim wildly that through its ‘Better Choice’ effort “our priority issues became the leading issues of the campaign, we look forward to meeting with the Prime Minister-elect Stephen Harper to see what we can get done.”

Major social movements such as the First Nations, the Council of Canadians and the Canadian Peace Alliance were barely noticeable. In the midst of the imperialist interventions by Canada and the re-organizing of the Canadian state to support U.S. security interests, there was no major national anti-war mobilization during the election. Smaller successful campaigns were had around healthcare issues, against foreign intervention in Haiti, and against Canadian involvement in the U.S. ballistic missile defence initiative. But these were the exceptions not the rule. The ‘Vote for a Change’ project launched by the Centre for Social Justice had an

ambiguous campaign message, and remained a marginal effort in any case. And the ‘Think Twice Coalition’ that brought social movement notables together a few weeks before voting day to warn against a Harper government made yet another call for a centre-centre alliance. It looked like the plea of despair that it was.

With such a poor foundation, it is not surprising that the social movements have no clear orientation after the election to begin to put together a new anti-neoliberal campaigning vehicle in opposition to the Harper government. Political initiative will lie with the government, and the unions and the social movements will be reactive as best as they can. They will receive little in the way of parliamentary support as the kinds of sustained efforts and militancy necessary to break neoliberal policies would also rupture the NDP’s centre-centre realignment strategy.

NEXT ROUND

The left exists in Canada today largely in the form of a politically drifting social democratic electoral machine, a union movement in retreat and disarray, and the scattered fragments of a global social justice movement. The radical left is mainly a series of hardened micro-organizations living in the past and replaying the tired lines of political actors long gone. These social forces as such can re-write some of the passages of the policies of the government of the day, but they cannot prevent the neoliberal tragedy from continuing to unfold. Indeed, after more than a quarter of a century of neoliberalism, the left is still unable to author an alternate script to neoliberal globalization, never mind gather the new actors together for a performance of an entirely different kind. The final illusions of a new opening coming from the Layton leadership of the NDP (which the New Politics Initiative, with its’ folding itself into the NDP and the Layton campaign with the embarrassment of no commitments being obtained, bears more than a little responsibility for) are now shattered.

The resistance to Canadian interventions in Haiti and the Middle East; the solidarity work forming for Venezuela and Bolivia; the campaigns against healthcare privatization; the growing boycott Israel campaign in support of the Palestinian struggle; the different relations being struck within – and with – the Québec left; and the unrest bubbling up in memberships in both CUPE and CAW over political drift and the lack of union fightbacks; are all hopeful voices for democratic alternatives that the Canadian electoral theatre is keeping silent. They must necessarily be heard. A different performance might move the Canadian peoples from passively watching the train wreck of capitalism unfolding, to start participating and dreaming of alternate scenarios. Otherwise, in 18 to 24 months from now, the Harper minority government will be drawing the curtain, a few new characters will enter the stage, but we will be witnessing the same electoral play all over again. This is the bleak reality of elections in liberal democracies in a time of neoliberalism. **R**

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