

Canadian NDP declares willingness to enter coalition with Liberals

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Thomas Mulcair, the leader of the trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP), has reiterated that his party is amenable to forming a coalition government with the Liberals—until recently Canadian big business’s preferred party of government—after this year’s federal election.

Mulcair touted the possibility of Canada’s social democrats joining hands with the Liberals, who when they last held office carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, in an interview on *The West Block*, a Global TV political affairs program, in late December.

Asked by *West Block* host Tim Clark if the NDP would ally with the Liberals in the event that no party wins a parliamentary majority, Mulcair said his party would “wait and see” the election results before determining its course of action. However, he went on to emphasize that it was the NDP that proposed the abortive 2008 coalition pact between the two parties, which the Liberals later scuttled.

“Don’t forget,” said Mulcair, “we’re the ones who made it a priority in 2008 to put the coalition idea on the table. We wrote it and signed it and the Liberals walked away from it.”

For good measure, Mulcair noted that he personally had played an important role in negotiating the 2008 coalition deal, which unravelled after the Canadian ruling class rallied round Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his use of the undemocratic office of the Governor-General to shut down parliament so as to prevent opposition MPs from exercising their constitutional right to defeat the government.

While Mulcair is concerned that if he is too forward in promoting a coalition it could cause NDP votes to bleed to the Liberals, this is hardly the first time he has placed on record his readiness to ally with them. “We’ve always said we’re ready to work with other parties,” declared Mulcair when the coalition question was raised last February. “We’re a progressive party. We want to get results.”

The NDP is currently the Official Opposition to the ruling Conservatives. But opinion polls have long shown it badly trailing both the Conservatives and the Liberals, who suffered their worst ever electoral defeat in 2011.

Mulcair’s *West Block* comments were directed at the trade union bureaucracy, large sections of which have indicated that they will drop their traditional across-the-board endorsement of the NDP, in favour of a call for a “strategic vote” for the candidate best-positioned to defeat the Conservative nominee.

The unions’ “Anybody But Harper” campaign is being modeled after their “Stop Hudak” campaign—the drive the unions mounted in Ontario to prevent the coming to power of Tim Hudak and his Conservatives. In practical terms, this campaign meant stumping for

the re-election of a Liberal government that, with the NDP’s backing in a minority parliament, had imposed massive social spending cuts and a two-year public sector wage freeze and illegalized teacher job action.

By highlighting the NDP’s role in the abortive 2008 coalition, Mulcair is trying to reassure the union bureaucrats that any frictions over the unions’ throwing much of their considerable organizational and financial muscle behind the Liberals will not be an impediment to the social democrats joining hands with the Liberals in a coalition if the parliamentary arithmetic makes this possible. Indeed, Mulcair’s remarks were meant to remind the unions that the social democrats were the chief protagonists of the coalition in 2008 and stand ready to reprise that role in 2015.

The NDP post-2011

Mulcair’s comments were also an effective admission that the social democrats’ best chance at entering the halls of power is in an alliance with the Liberals.

Since becoming the Official Opposition in 2011, the NDP has hemorrhaged working class support, witnessed repeated defections from its ranks to the Liberals, and been drubbed at the polls in a string of provincial elections and federal by-elections, as well as several high-profile mayoralty races.

The NDP had placed great stock in capturing power in British Columbia in May 2013, with the aim of using it to showcase a pragmatic, business-friendly NDP. Instead, the right-wing Liberals were returned to office for a fourth successive term in an election marked by a near record-low turnout.

The NDP, which in 2009 had formed its first ever government in Nova Scotia, was trounced in the 2013 Nova Scotia election. After four years in which it implemented major social spending cuts, hiked various regressive taxes and electricity rates, and upheld Nova Scotia’s notorious anti-union “Michelin bill,” the Nova Scotia NDP was reduced to third place, winning just seven seats.

Underlying the decline in the NDP’s political fortunes is its unstinting defense of capitalism and its anti-worker record when in power, which have alienated wide sections of the working class. A political vehicle of the trade union bureaucracy and privileged sections of the middle class since its formation in 1961, the NDP has shifted ever further to the right over the past three decades, repudiating its milquetoast national reformist program and embracing

capitalist austerity and imperialist war.

It responded to its sudden and entirely unanticipated elevation to Official Opposition in 2011 by mounting a full court press to convince the Canadian the ruling elite it could supplant the Liberals as their “left” party of government. Toward that end, the NDP immediately moved to purge any reference however nominal to socialism from its constitution and chose Mulcair, a former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister, to replace the late Jack Layton as party leader.

Mulcair has taken every opportunity to reassure the ruling class that his party will not raise income taxes for the wealthy, although they are at record lows, will maintain corporate tax rates below those in the US, and reduce taxes still further for small business. With much fanfare, he recently announced an NDP government would raise the federal minimum wage to \$15, but this would not even take effect until 2019 and actually increase the wages of less than 1 percent of all Canadian workers!

As under Layton, Mulcair’s NDP has supported an aggressive, imperialist foreign policy, lauding Canada’s participation in the NATO war for regime change in Libya, echoing the Harper government’s full-throated support for last summer’s Israeli invasion of Gaza, and endorsing Canada’s role in the overthrow of Ukraine’s elected president and the subsequent NATO threats and aggression against Russia.

The NDP’s opposition to Canada’s participation in the new US-led war in the Middle East is founded upon purely tactical considerations. The NDP fully supports the US-drive to expand its strategic dominance of the world’s most important oil-exporting region by combating ISIS and deposing the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, but would prefer this be accomplished by funnelling weapons and funds to local militias.

Contrary to the attempts by the corporate press to paint irreconcilable differences between the NDP, Liberals, and Conservatives, the official record demonstrates that all of them are committed to defending the interests of Canadian big business at home and abroad, differing only in terms of tactical considerations and questions of lifestyle and identity politics.

The 2008 coalition agreement

The NDP have been in a de facto alliance with the Liberals for most of the last ten years, beginning with Layton’s 2004 decision to establish a “blue ribbon” committee led by NDP elder statesman Ed Broadbent to investigate the possibility of an NDP-Liberal coalition and the NDP’s decision the following spring to back the Martin Liberal government and its budget in exchange for a few tiny social spending increases.

The NDP’s coalition committee met steadily until 2008, when Layton signed a formal agreement to enter into a Liberal-led coalition government.

An analysis of the proposed 2008 coalition’s policy accord furnishes all the evidence necessary to completely dispel any notion that a Liberal-NDP coalition would be a “progressive” alternative for Canadian workers—a coalition that the NDP is again actively courting.

The policy accord took as its starting point a commitment to “fiscal responsibility”—a euphemism for subservience to big business and its mantra of international competitiveness. It outlined the need for

investment in key sectors of the economy, like auto and forestry, to “create and save jobs”, but made this contingent on raising corporate profits through plant closures, job cuts, and contract concessions, including wage cuts.

Particularly noteworthy was the NDP’s complete abandonment of two of its main “progressive” policy planks from the 2008 election campaign—the rescinding of the Conservative government’s five year, \$50 billion scheme of corporate tax cuts and the withdrawal of Canadian Armed Forces’ troops from Afghanistan. In the name of acting “on the economy and in the interest of Canadian families,” the NDP pledged in the coalition agreement to fully implement the Conservative-Liberal corporate tax cut and to back Canada playing a leading role in the neo-colonial Afghan counter-insurgency war through 2011.

Current Liberal leader Justin Trudeau has sought to quash all talk of a coalition, saying that there are “very big impediments” to such a partnership with the NDP. Given that the two parties share right-wing, pro-business positions, and have collaborated closely in provinces like Ontario to the detriment of the working class, Trudeau’s dismissal of a coalition should be recognized for the ploy it is. The Liberals calculate they will be able to oust the deeply unpopular Conservatives and return to power without the help of the NDP or at least without having to enter a formal alliance through a coalition or policy accord in a minority government situation.

Workers should take note that the Harper government has itself only broadened and extended the anti-working class offensive mounted by its predecessors in the successive Chretien-Martin Liberal governments. Between 1995 and 1998 the Liberals carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, slashing tens of billions from Medicare and post-secondary education and shredding unemployment insurance. Then in 2000, they dramatically slashed corporate and capital gains taxes, in what the neo-conservative *National Post* hailed as a “Canadian Alliance” budget.

The Chretien-Martin Liberal governments also massively expanded the national security apparatus, including adopting the draconian 2001 Anti-Terrorism Act and approving systematic spying on Canadians’ electronic communications, and began the rearmament of the Canadian Armed Forces, while joining US-led wars in the former Yugoslavia and Afghanistan.

Various considerations will inevitably play a role in determining whether a Liberal-NDP coalition government will ultimately manifest itself after the upcoming elections. What is abundantly clear is that the Canadian working class will pay dearly for such a government, which will remain faithful in all essentials to the current Conservative program of capitalist austerity and predatory war.



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