

A Report on Canada's New Democratic Party and the "Leap Manifesto"

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The campaign has begun in Canada's New Democratic Party to replace Tom Mulcair as leader, after the party's disastrous performance in the 2015 Federal election, the results of which induced a major crisis in the party, from which it has yet to recover. In 2011 under its previous leader, Jack Layton, the NDP had achieved the status of Official Opposition, the closest it had ever come to forming a government in Ottawa. Layton, who had campaigned in that election while suffering from prostate cancer, died not long after that. Mulcair replaced him as party leader.

Similar in composition and policies to the Australian and British Labour Parties, the NDP since its founding in 1961, has been supported in one form or other by most of the country's trade unions, with a membership that has fluctuated in recent years between 80,000 and 128,000. It once advocated that Canada get out of NATO, but since then, of course, it has moved far to the right, restricting itself to managing neo-liberalism. Although it has been in office provincially many times — the NDP is presently the government of Alberta — in federal elections, nevertheless it has always been treated with suspicion by ruling circles and dismissed by the big business media as not yet ready for government.

Consistent with the party's earlier move to the right under Layton, who as leader of the party in the 2008 election, advocated a policy of "no deficits", Mulcair, polling at around 37.5% and with a good chance of winning, but eager to prove the NDP would be a reliable manager of capitalism, ran in the 2015 election saying he would maintain austerity and promised a "balanced budget" and not run a "deficit", as Toronto's *Globe and Mail*, put it, "a pragmatic alternative to Harper", the Tory Prime Minister.

For many New Democrats, it was an astonishing thing to see: Mulcair repeatedly accused the Liberals under its newly elected leader, Justin Trudeau, of being "fiscally irresponsible". Coming from behind, it turned into a golden opportunity for Trudeau, who attacked Prime Minister Stephen Harper's hard right policies, and deftly moved to the left of the NDP by promising to increase the federal debt to rebuild the country's crumbling infrastructure system to spur economic growth and to provide jobs, Keynesian measures that the NDP of old would have warmly embraced and maybe even have proposed.

By all accounts, the 2015 election was a disaster for the NDP. By election-day, thousands of traditional NDP voters had deserted it, switching to the Liberals. Losing fifty-one seats, it finished a distant third, far behind the Liberals who comfortably formed the government with one hundred and eighty-four seats, deeply disappointing many trade-unionists, workers and party activists who had hoped for a government that would fight for their needs.

But it turns out that for the party's environmental activists and socialists, the 2015 campaign was not a totally bleak picture. The "Leap Manifesto" [\[1\]](#) was launched just as the election was about to be called. It is the most important policy statement in terms of content and influence upon the NDP to be produced in many years, if not decades. In the midst of the party's electoral defeat, it has provoked a major discussion about its future and how to deal with our environmental crisis to which

Alberta's vast tar sands, for example, are a major contributor. Originating from outside the party, the Manifesto has been gaining steam ever since with increasing support from constituency associations and has had a profound impact upon the internal debates within it.

Released on September 15th, 2015, the key architects of the Manifesto are the writer Naomi Klein and her film-maker husband, Avi Lewis. She, well known in Canada and around the world for her writings about capitalism — her recent book, "This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate" and he for his documentary films, the latest produced to accompany Klein's book and titled, "This Changes Everything".

A "non- partisan" declaration, according to Klein and Lewis, the statement was the product of a panel of over sixty prominent activists from the environmental movement, trade unionists, indigenous rights groups, migrant justice movements, artists and intellectuals who had met over a weekend to produce it. Hoping to influence the election discourse of all the parties — hence the "non-partisan" characterization — it was an effort to force them to address our growing environmental crisis, about which our ruling parties passionately talk, but about which they do very little. The Manifesto, rather than calling for "steps" to address the crisis, called for a "leap" in efforts by governments — thus the designation, "leapers" attached to its supporters — for a fundamental re-orientation of the Canadian economy away from dependency on fossil fuels and towards a carbon-free production system by 2050.

"We know", the Manifesto states, "that the time for this great transition is short. Climate scientists have told us that this is the decade to take decisive action to prevent catastrophic global warming. That means small steps will no longer get us where we need to go." To date it has received over 30,000 signatures.

At its national convention in Edmonton, the NDP crisis was on full display for everyone to see. It became the scene of a humiliating defeat for Mulcair and the party brass. Desperate that he hold on to his position as party leader despite the debacle of the election, it campaigned for a vote of confidence for him, some of them even suggesting the matter should be deferred until there was a referendum of the entire party membership on the matter. But that effort was swiftly torpedoed when several major union leaders, among them Unifor's Jerry Diaz, the Canadian Labour Congress', Hassan Yussuff, supported by the Public Service Alliance of Canada and the Alberta Federation of Labour, told him he must go. Only 48% of the delegates' supported him when it was finally put to the vote. He was hoping for two-thirds, or more.

The crises also expressed itself around the issue of what approach the party should take to the oil, gas and pipeline industries, revealing deep tensions between the Provincial NDP in Alberta and British Columbia on the one side, and the provincial parties in Central Canada and Atlantic Canada, on the other. This raises critical questions about the party's future as a unified organization. Not unrelated to that issue, however, was the discussion about the Manifesto, with its fifteen demands for getting Canada off carbon energy and which posed the issue what kind of party the NDP should be if it is to provide a solution to the fundamental issue of our time, a worsening of the environment and increasing atmospheric temperatures.

The events at the NDP convention have been discussed widely within the left here. They were a major topic of discussion at the International Socialist's "Marxism 2017 Conference" a couple of months ago, where Avi Lewis spoke to a large meeting about it. Also on that panel was Carolyn Egan, prominent in the I.S. and a local leader of the Steelworkers' union, she was one of the original members of group that produced the Manifesto. Andre Frappier, a leader of Quebec Solidaire, was also a speaker.

Lewis told the meeting that the discussion about the Manifesto got started at the convention when Harry Kopyto, a well-known Toronto left-wing socialist and long-time activist in the party initiated the debate by persuading five constituency associations to pass a resolution in support of it, to be joined later by twelve more by the time the of the convention.

Lewis has emerged as a major figure on the left here. He was quite candid in his remarks. He said he believed that the Manifesto "is inadequate and needs stronger language, such as no worker should pay for a crisis they didn't create." He said that he or other "leapers" had no input into the wording of Kopyto's original resolution but in collaboration with him, he, Lewis, had worked "to water it down so that the NDP could move forward with it", a compromise position that proposed the document be discussed throughout the party until the following convention in two years. This position carried. Kopyto recently reported that the number of constituency associations now supporting the Manifesto stands at twenty-eight.

Since the convention, the Manifesto, as the "leapers" had hoped, has become the main topic of discussion. It has helped to attract a new generation of young activists to the party, and even re-invigorate older members, but it has also met with an unprecedented storm of criticism from columnists in Canada's big-business media, with editorials appearing in major papers such as Toronto's *Globe and Mail*, denouncing it. A major figure on the CBC, Rex Murphy has repeatedly denounced it as "madness".

Ex- Prime Minister Brian Mulroney told a meeting of business leaders that it "represented nihilism and must be defeated." Three provincial premiers also have attacked it. Saskatchewan Conservative Premier, Brad Wall stated that if implemented, "it would shut down major parts of the province". British Columbia's Liberal Premier, Christie Clark, claimed parts of B.C. would turn into "ghost towns" and the NDP Premier of Alberta, Rachel Notley, rejected it totally, seeing it as a threat to Alberta's tar sands, jobs and the oil industry as a whole, as she moves closer to the Justin Trudeau' federal Liberals' energy policies, especially on pipelines. It's been a long time since any statement from the left has elicited such a rabid response from ruling circles.

In Canada, the Lewis name is almost synonymous with that of social democracy. Avi's grand-father, David Lewis, who was an M.P. and leader of the NDP's predecessor, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, was a founding leader of the NDP. His father, Stephen, was leader of Ontario's New Democrats for many years and was Canada's Ambassador to the United Nations. The family has never been known as a friend of the left, but that might be changing now as Stephen Lewis has made several powerful speeches in support of his son's positions, indicating there might be differences in their circles about the party's drift to the right.

Avi Lewis has been tireless in travelling the country talking up the Manifesto. He seems to be everywhere these days. At the I.S. meeting in Toronto, he said he senses the discussion in the party had helped shift the membership to the left, but that this was yet to be reflected in the party leadership. Neither he nor Naomi Klein, he said, have any intention of entering the contest to be leader and stressed that "leapers" would not be solely concentrating their activities on the NDP. Supporters of the Manifesto have set up a small NGO and are using it as an organizing tool and across the country, he said, they were working with environmental and community activists in campaigns outside the NDP to address climate change issues. For example, in Thunder Bay, Ontario, he told the audience, "leapers" are organizing a slate of candidates to run in the next municipal elections, on an environmental programme.

It's still early days, but so far six contenders have entered the contest to be the future leader of the NDP, four of them sitting M.P.s. Six debates are scheduled for across the country, but none in Toronto, according to the party's website. There have been two recently, one in Ottawa and another

in Montreal. The press reports that the atmosphere has been quite “collegial”, among the contenders, with most of them offering anodyne criticisms of how the Federal election was handled, but too “consensual to be a debate”, according to Chantal Hebert in the *Toronto Star*. Five hundred people filled the hall in Ottawa, with another 200 in an overflow room.

A recent entrant into the contest has been MPP Jaqmeet Singh, Deputy Leader of the Ontario New Democrats, and who according to press reports, is hoping to make a splash, “as an exciting new voice”. He has yet to make a statement about where he stands on the Manifesto, but it would be the first time for a Sikh to lead a major party in Canada. Programmatically, he doesn’t appear that much different from the person he wishes to replace.

Niki Ashton, an M.P. from Manitoba and the only woman to enter the race so far, appears to be the most left of them all. She has stated that “it is time to take back our country from the rich and the powerful” and that with her as leader, the party would say, “You privatize it? We nationalize it. You deregulate it? We regulate it.” At the Edmonton convention she voted for the Manifesto to be a priority for discussion in the party. She has recently come under attack from Conservative circles because of her solidarity with the hunger strikers in prison in Palestine.

We’re still many months away from the convention. As you can see from the foregoing it promises to be a major event in the life of the party and the left. By then the Manifesto could become a major differentiating issue among the candidates and the divisions could further intensify as it wrestles to reconcile the expansion of the energy industry with a clean environment, a policy for which the Manifesto lays out.

Ernest Tate, May 23, 2017

P.S.

*Ernie Tate’s latest letter from North America:

<http://leftunity.org/a-report-on-canadas-new-democratic-party-and-the-leap-manifesto/>

Footnotes

[1] <https://leapmanifesto.org/en/the-leap-manifesto/#manifesto-content>