

# The New Democratic Party, Canada's Leading Parliamentary Minority

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Thomas Mulcair, leader of Canada's NDP.

The New Democratic Party's (NDP) emergence as the leading minority in Canada's House of Commons can be considered transcendent in the nation's political history. It is the first time a left social democratic grouping has played that role.

This is particularly important given that Liberal and Conservative forces had monopolized power since 1867, making it possible for the elites of both to dominate the political stage. This meant that when one of those parties was in office, the other was invariably the discursive counterweight as the leading minority. This translated into alternation in office of Liberals and Conservatives that stretched out over 40 general elections.<sup>1</sup> However, that dynamic abruptly came to an end in the May 2011 election when the NDP became the first minority with

103 members, leading the Liberal Party by 69 seats. Since that time, the NDP has assumed the task of serving as a counterweight to the majority Conservative Party, headed by experienced Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who leads his Conservative caucus's 166 MPs in Canada's lower house.<sup>2</sup>

## BACKGROUND

While the NDP's origins are found in different political currents and union organizations, it was the merger between the Canadian Labour Congress and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in the early 1960s that put the current face on the party.

Since its inception as a party, the NDP, under the guidance of its first national leader, Tommy Douglas, became the

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greatest promoter of federal Medicare, which Douglas developed and promoted during his term as premier of Saskatchewan.<sup>3</sup> By 1967, that socialization of medical care became a national demand.<sup>4</sup> Medicare's media success led Douglas to be considered the most important person in Canada in local surveys, which has been capitalized on by the New Democratic left, since the party is considered the direct descendent of this public good. Nevertheless, its federal implementation fell to Liberal administrations, which, in turn, replicated the directives adopted in Great Britain after World War II.<sup>5</sup>

The NDP has sought to capitalize on programs with social content in its quest for popular acceptance. Therefore, it did not support Paul Martin's minority Liberal government in 2005, which refused to guarantee the non-privatization of health-care sectors in the medium and long terms, or increase public investment.<sup>6</sup> This position helped reinforce the perception that the NDP considered investment in the public sector a stance that forged its identity.

To this was added the vehemence with which the NDP leadership pushed the idea of forming a coalition government in late 2008, for the first time in Canadian history, together with the Liberal Party, then headed by Stéphane Dion. This sent a message to voters that the NDP and its leader Jack Layton were willing to innovate in the country's politics. And it worked, despite the rejection of Liberal elites who refused to create a coalition government with the left, culminating in the removal of Stéphane Dion.

Later the inconsistencies and contradictions of the new Liberal leadership, which fell to Michael Ignatieff, would end by strengthening Jack Layton's image, making him the firmest and most coherent figure of the opposition.

So, the call for early elections in May 2011 put the NDP in the historic position of being able to win away from one of the two predominant parties—in this case the Liberals—the position of being first minority in the House of Commons. While this was the result of Jack Layton's good handling of the NDP leadership since his rise in 2003, it must be noted that Liberal Party's internal divisions, corruption, and political zigzagging of its last leader reduced its chances for electoral success.

#### JACK LAYTON AND THE SUCCESSFUL 2011 CAMPAIGN

To put the NDP's 2011 electoral success in perspective, we need to look at the figure of Jack Layton. His political career

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was characterized by ideological coherence since his work as a member of the Toronto City Council, a post he occupied in 1982. He quickly stood out and headed up the left wing of the city council, opposing the construction of the SkyDome and Toronto's candidacy for the 1996 Summer Olympics because he thought both unbeneficial to the general public in the medium term.

Thus, for Layton, the 1980s and 1990s were a chance to explain his ideas nationally through his work on the Toronto City Council. In line with this, once NDP leader Alexa McDonough resigned because of her administration's slim results, Jack Layton would receive the support of well-known NDP members like former leader Ed Broadbent, who would push his candidacy as the party's new national leader.<sup>7</sup> In the context of this dynamic, the NDP's January 2003 internal elections handed Layton an absolute victory in a single round of voting when he received 53.52 percent of the delegates' votes.<sup>8</sup>

Since that time, the NDP has concentrated on winning over the urban voters in the central part of the country (in this case Ontario and Québec), making it clear that its traditional positions in the West, the Prairies, and the Atlantic Coast had to be reinforced with voters in the country's two most highly populated provinces.

On taking over as NDP leader, Jack Layton immediately pushed a very aggressive agenda against the governing Liberal Party, pointing out that it was very similar to the Conservatives. This strategy gradually won attraction, above all among the parts of the public that observed how the Liberal Party was caught up in internal clashes and government corruption. Layton was very clear, particularly after the Liberal elites refused to form a coalition government in 2008, that the growth of the NDP depended directly on weakening the Liberal Party. In this sense, the New Democrats had to counter the traditional Liberal strategy of discouraging the voters by saying the only way to stop and defeat the Conservatives was voting for their party since a vote for the NDP would be wasted. So, from 2009 on, Jack Layton began publically compar-

ing his ideas with Michael Ignatieff's ambiguities, and thus gradually showed the Liberals and their leader up as a group in crisis, contradictory, and not very interested in people's problems. This positioned the NDP as the only opposition to the governing Conservative Party. The chance to definitively contrast New Democratic and Liberal proposals came with the 2011 election campaign.

During that process, Jack Layton and the NDP won more acceptance due to the Liberal Party's bad campaign and its leader's bad image. In this sense, it is appropriate to point out that Jack Layton's accusation at the April televised debate that Michael Ignatieff had been an irresponsible MP, missing more than 70 percent of the votes without justification when he was leader of the opposition, was an effective blow to Liberal aspirations and catapulted the New Democrats in the polls.<sup>9</sup>

The May 2, 2011 results gave the New Democratic Party and Jack Layton the opportunity to head the entire opposition, relegating one of the two dominant parties, the Liberals, to a secondary position in the political arena. Starting with the beginning of the 41<sup>st</sup> session of Parliament, the voice of the Canadian left could be contrasted directly with the decisions made by Stephen Harper's right-wing government.

#### LAYTON'S EARLY RETIREMENT AND THE NEW LEADER

Although it was known that Jack Layton had had prostate cancer in 2009, the rumors of a relapse spread after the 2011 federal elections and proved to be real once a very thin, visibly weak Layton confirmed the reappearance of his cancer, obliging him to leave the political arena to seek treatment.

The announcement came on July 26, 2011, together with Layton's proposal to turn the interim NDP leadership—and therefore, that of the opposition in the House of Commons—over to MP Nicole Turmel. However, Layton died August 22, leaving a posthumous letter to the country.<sup>10</sup> In it, he laid out his last directives to the party, outstanding among which was, once again, keeping Nicole Turmel on as interim leader

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and convening internal elections as soon as possible to consolidate the party and renew political programs for future elections. In the second part of the letter, he bid good-bye to the citizenry with a message of hope and unity.

So, the NDP National Convention was held in Toronto on March 24, 2012, to elect a new leadership. After four votes, MP Thomas Mulcair came out the winner, a moderate candidate compared to the other possible leader, Jack Layton's personal friend Brian Topp.

It should be mentioned that Topp became the candidate most identified with the task of maintaining the NDP's traditional principles. This was reinforced once former NDP leader Ed Broadbent pointed out that Mulcair was a threat to the party since, in his view, his modernizing positions would end up destroying it and its principles in a short time, turning it into another Liberal Party.<sup>11</sup> Broadbent was the one who had successfully launched Jack Layton's candidacy nine years before.

In the end, Brian Topp's positions (recognizing the Palestinian state,<sup>12</sup> eliminating Canada's Senate, and restricting the Canadian prime minister's powers)<sup>13</sup> were elements that favored Thomas Mulcair. In fact, different specialists had considered Mulcair the Canadian Tony Blair and a politician who could take the NDP more toward the center than the left.<sup>14</sup> His detractors underline that the former British prime minister's strategy of taking the Labor Party more toward the center than to the left in order to win votes ended by strengthening the Conservative Party and ensuring its return to office.

#### SOME FINAL REFLECTIONS

The NDP has emerged as the first minority in Canada's lower house and developed under particular circumstances that include the weakening of the previously powerful Liberal Party and the early search for a new leadership after Jack Layton's premature death.

That succession took place right at the beginning of the parliamentary activities of the 41<sup>st</sup> legislature, facilitating the arrival of Thomas Mulcair, a leader with a new agenda. His election seemed to have been a response more to the party's urgent need to boost its vote count to eventually be able to win office than to the need to strengthen party principles as a basis for distinguishing itself from the Conservative government.

The NDP has sought to be a voice that contrasts with the Tory government, refusing to support the C-38 bill, which concentrates federal budgetary programs and projects, and

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includes changes to 70 laws in different spheres like immigration, refugee status, and the environment, among others.<sup>15</sup> The fact is that both on domestic economic and political issues and on international matters, the voice of the NDP leader has kept up with the actions of Prime Minister Stephen Harper on different topics.

Domestically, Tom Mulcair has surpassed even the traditional positions of the Conservatives on issues like free trade: he has insisted on rebooting the World Trade Organization (WTO) and forging trade agreements with the European Union, Brazil, India, and South Africa, leaving agreements with small Latin American countries in the background. He has also put to one side the NDP's traditional critiques of the North American Free Trade Agreement and pressured the Tory government to speed up a trade agreement with Japan, despite the opposition of their traditional labor allies, the Canadian Auto Workers Union.<sup>16</sup>

In the international arena, Tom Mulcair has backed Canada's Conservative government in its constant support to Israel's policy in the Middle East and the Palestinian territories. He also supported Stephen Harper's decision to break diplomatic relations with Iran in 2012 and sending troops and Canadian military equipment to Libya in 2012. In the House of Commons, he also backed the French military intervention in Mali in early 2013.

All this has taken place just when the NDP is governing the provinces of Manitoba and Nova Scotia (with Greg Selinger and Darrell Dexter as premiers, respectively), and when, recently, the approval ratings of party leaders in British Columbia (Adrian Dix) and Ontario (Andrea Horwath) have been optimum.

Regardless of the ideological contradictions that the new NDP leader has exhibited, his party is the country's second largest political force. However, the real impact of his strategy will not be revealed until the 2015 federal elections, when Québec voters will determine the NDP's future with their 58 seats won in the last federal elections. Only then will the possible cost of Mulcair's turn in ideology and discourse be

laid bare: he has bet on "modernizing" his party in order to improve its electoral chances of winning office by bringing in votes and parliamentary seats from other provinces. ■■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> It is important to point out that, while in the 1993 federal elections the Bloc Québécois Party became the leading minority with 54 seats, the Conservative bloc (in this case the Reform Party with 52 seats and the Progressive Conservative Party with 2) played a more active role in its negotiations with the then-majority Liberal government. At that point, the Liberals had 177 seats in the House of Commons, where the country's political life is discussed and decided, leaving the Senate with the job of ratifying what is passed in the lower house.

<sup>2</sup> Data and figures for the May 2011 federal elections can be checked at "Elections Canada," <http://www.elections.ca/home.aspx>, accessed in February 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Medicare began operating in the province of Saskatchewan in 1962.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Craig Brown, *The Illustrated History of Canada. A Canadian Classic, Now Completely Revised* (Ontario: Key Porter Books, 2002), p. 511.

<sup>5</sup> John C. Courtney y David E. Smith, *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 84.

<sup>6</sup> For more information, see CBC News, "In depth. The 38th Parliament, June 28, 2004–November 29, 2005," <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/parliament38/index.html>, accessed in February 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Brooks, *Canadian Democracy Seventh Edition* (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 314.

<sup>8</sup> Parliament of Canada, "New Democratic Party. Leadership Conventions," <http://www.parl.gc.ca/ParlInfo/Files/Party.aspx?Item=78f08bac-f67d-4621-9381-c4f18b1a0380&Language=E&Section=LeadershipConvention>, accessed in February 2013.

<sup>9</sup> See figures and data in "Elections, 2011 Canadian Elections Results," <http://www.sfu.ca/~aheard/elections/results.html>, accessed in February 2013.

<sup>10</sup> "New Democratic Party: A Letter to Canadians from the Honourable Jack Layton," <http://www.ndp.ca/letter-to-canadians-from-jack-layton>, accessed in February 2013.

<sup>11</sup> *National Post*, "Ed Broadbent defends his criticism of NDP frontrunner Thomas Mulcair's credentials," <http://news.nationalpost.com/2012/03/17/ed-broadbent-defends-criticism-of-ndp-frontrunner-thomas-mulcairs-credentials/>, accessed in February 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Macleans.ca, "Israel, Palestine and Brian Topp," <http://www2.macleans.ca/2011/09/22/israel-palestine-and-brian-topp/>, accessed in February 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Brian Topp.ca, "Topp Releases Plan to Restore Confidence to Government," <http://briantopp.ca/issues/topp-releases-plan-restore-confidence-government>, accessed in February 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Socialist.ca, "Mulcair: the NDP's Tony Blair," <http://www.socialist.ca/node/721>, accessed in February 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Radio Canadá Internacional, "Gobierno conservador canadiense rechaza las 871 enmiendas propuestas por la oposición," [http://www.rcinet.ca/espagnol/archivo/noticias/11\\_52\\_07\\_2012-06-15-gobierno-conservador-canadiense-rechaza-las-871-enmiendas-propuestas-por-la-oposicion/](http://www.rcinet.ca/espagnol/archivo/noticias/11_52_07_2012-06-15-gobierno-conservador-canadiense-rechaza-las-871-enmiendas-propuestas-por-la-oposicion/).

<sup>16</sup> CBC News, "Tom Mulcair's NDP takes vigorously pro-trade position," <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2012/11/15/pol-cp-ndp-trade-policy.html>, accessed in February 2013.