

Canada's Elections and the Collapse of the New Democratic Party (NDP)

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Region: [Canada](#)

Global Research, October 21, 2015

The Trudeau family is back in the political seat of governance. Justin Trudeau, Canada's second youngest leader, will occupy a position his father so comprehensively dominated.

Stephen Harper was tossed out of office after having remade the conservative movement in Canada, putting forth a mix of vulgar incitements (the niqab debate; stripping citizenship; anti-terrorist platforms), neoliberal trade policies, and hammed up promises of Canadian glory.

The story of the 2015 election may well be remembered as one when Harper, after nearly ten years in power, finally lost his hold. But it should be remembered as one where the third force of Canadian politics failed to gain power. The National Democratic Party, a party that should have come up with more heft, simply slid away in the last weeks of the campaign.

It did not seem that way at first. Rachel Notley's victory in Alberta in May suggested that the NDP could match it even in conservative ridings. And the party's opposition to such police state bunk as C-51 had earned it status as a challenger. Tom Mulcair, in other words, seemed to be doing something right.

At the voting booths, Mulcair was placed through the wringer. The flirting voters, having tantalised the party strategists, were leaving in droves. The party that should have provided a genuine alternative to the Liberal centrist model of elitist capture was soundly crushed.

At the dissolution of parliament, the NDP had 95 seats. At the end of Monday night, it had 40, by any stretch a catastrophic collapse of its base. Its solid Quebec support disintegrated. Mulcair himself barely beat off a challenge in his own riding from the Liberal contender.

An NDP strategist suggested he had not been "angry" enough.[1] He was certainly not charming enough, not like his predecessor, Jack Layton, who managed to win support in Quebec in 2011 in dramatic fashion. The passion was lacking; the businesslike manner was underwhelming. Harper's legacy in Canadian politics has been so profound in the way it has trundled angry politics onto centre stage.

Instead, the brow beaten Mulcair had to suggest before a hundred supporters or so at the Palais des congrès de Montréal that "this election had to do with change, and today Canadians have turned the page on the last 10 years and have rejected fear and divisiveness."

The Liberal triumph, in contrast, stole a march on perceived NDP softness, even if Mulcair did seem firm on such points as deficit spending. (Like the Conservatives, the line here was the unimpeachable glory of the balanced budget.) On points such as the niqab ban, Mulcair found himself trapped between Harper's purported majoritarian sentiment and Quebec sovereigntist Gilles Duceppe, who heartily agreed with such measures.

Commentators have hit upon strained similarities – that the country's 15th decade seemed much like its 10th – 1957-1967. Robert Wright surmised that Canadian “distemper” was not picked up by the managerial types in the form of John Diefenbaker and Lester B. Pearson. Grey Canada had had enough by 1968, ushering in an age of Trudeaumania. Nothing like that is in the wings on this occasion.

There is the usual chatter about reforms the Liberals might initiate. There are mutterings about overhauling the antiquated first past the post electoral system that disenfranchises more than enfranchises – and a range of other measures that are simply unlikely to happen.

Will Trudeau wind back the militarised establishment, and Harper's trashing of “soft power” options? The latter made Canada a suitably aggressive deputy of US foreign policy. Or will the newly elected leader puncture the security, surveillance state, which the Liberals backed?

The Anti-terrorism Act, 2015, had Trudeau's support, which effectively pitted the legislature against the spirit of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Canadian Civil Liberties Association and Canadian Journalists for Free Expression have argued that parts of the C-51 legislation violate that sacred document “in a manner that is not justified in a free an democratic society.”[2]

It should be remembered that it was the Liberals who created C-11, Canada's own variant of the Stop Piracy Online Act, a statutory creation it subsequently help pass with the Tories. (Fittingly, much of this spirit can be found in the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement's Intellectual Property chapter.)

While Trudeau promises much, the element of posturing is fundamental. In debates, he may well have been aggressive against Harperism, but in votes, he did something else. He skipped the final vote on C-24, otherwise known as the “Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act”, the same act he so roundly condemned as creating a second-tier of citizens. He backed, along with 29 other Liberals, Bill C-7, given the rather colourful title “Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act”.

The centrist, in short, is cursed by calculated compromises that reactionaries do not need to consider. The only ideology of relevance there is one of worn appearances that may, given a moment, vanish. The NDP tended to be less burdened by that legacy. When it came to the polling both, that qualifying feature did not prove enough.

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Notes

[1] <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/politics/mulcair-failing-to-maintain-the-momentum>

[2] <http://www.canadianprogressiveworld.com/2015/10/19/a-canadian-progressives-case-against-just-in-trudeau-becoming-canadas-next-prime-minister/>

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