

Canada's "Left" New Democratic Party (NDP) Endorses Corporate, US-NATO War Agenda

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Is the NDP the solution or part of the problem for those us who promote a Canadian foreign policy that favours ordinary people around the world?

While pushing arms control measures and oversight of Canadian mining companies, this 'Left' party generally backs the military and a Western pro-capitalist outlook to global affairs.

In 2011 the party supported two House of Commons votes endorsing the bombing of Libya. The party's most recent election platform called for maintaining the highest level of military spending since World War II. In a more recent display of militarism NDP veterans affairs critic Peter Stoffer joined some veterans in criticizing an agreement between retailer Target and the Royal Canadian Legion allowing red poppies to be sold outside the company's stores. "We agreed that outside the front doors would be ideal and obviously if the weather is inclement or they prefer they are welcome to stand inside the double doors as well," said Target spokesperson Lisa Gibson at the end of last month.

But this wasn't good enough for many red poppy sellers who want to set up inside. So Stoffer demanded that Target "let these veterans into their stores, set up their tables and sell the poppies" and called on the company "to allow them [red poppy sellers] to come into the store at all times."

Remembrance Day Poppies commemorate Canadians who have died at war. Not being commemorated are the Afghans or Libyans killed by Canadians in recent years or the Iraqis killed two decades ago or the Koreans killed in the early 1950s or the Russians, South Africans, Sudanese and others killed before that. By focusing exclusively on 'our' side Remembrance Day poppies reinforce a sense that Canada's cause is righteous, a sentiment often used to promote wars.

One wonders if the NDP is willing to call on Target to allow peace organizations to set up tables and sell anti-war white poppies?

The same day Stoffer criticized Target, Michael Byers, a former NDP candidate and Thomas Mulcair leadership campaigner, co-authored a *National Post* opinion piece titled "Putting Politics Before Soldiers". Based on a report Byers co-authored for the Rideau Institute and Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, the article argued that Harper's Conservatives are spending \$2 billion to buy tanks that are no longer necessary since the US military has shifted its counterinsurgency tactics. The article glowingly cited the Petraeus Doctrine, which is named after General David Petraeus who was in charge of US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. "The doctrine calls for soldiers to engage with and support local people so as to

erode any incentive they might have to side with insurgents.”

The article said nothing about the thousands of Iraqis and Afghans killed by the US-led forces implementing the Petraeus Doctrine. Nor does Byers’ report call for a reduction in Canada’s high-level of military spending.

While promoting US counterinsurgency tactics and red poppy sellers, the NDP was quiet on the recent visit to Toronto by Africa’s most blood-stained leader, Rwanda’s Paul Kagame. Nor have they said much about Ottawa’s support for the Egyptian military’s ongoing repression or foreign minister John Baird’s anti-Iran efforts with the Gulf Cooperation Council monarchies.

It wasn’t always this bad.

A new biography about one of the NDP’s more courageous MPs touches on the party’s tendency to support the foreign policy establishment. In a published excerpt of *Svend Robinson: A Life in Politics*, Vancouver NDP MP Libby Davies told the book’s author: “Some people are concerned that we’ll slide, especially on foreign affairs. He [Robinson] was an outstanding voice on foreign affairs when he was critic for so many years. He never shied away from things... People wanted it. They wanted a party that actually had a real, critical position on foreign affairs — that wasn’t the Time magazine version ... and that’s, I fear, what we’ve come around more to now.”

Robinson was willing to aggressively and creatively challenge the foreign-policy establishment. He was a founder of the Canadian wing of Parliamentarians for East Timor and questioned Canada’s role in the 2004 overthrow of Haiti’s elected government. In a particularly principled action, Robinson responded to Israel’s effort to seal off Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat in Ramallah by trying to travel there in October 2002. This act of solidarity unleashed a media storm, prompting NDP leader Alexa McDonough to strip Robinson of his role as foreign affairs critic.

Robinson’s time as foreign critic represents a shining moment for the party’s international policy (It should be noted, however, that Robinson backed the 1999 bombing of the former Yugoslavia, only turning critical over a month after it began.). His term also highlights the tension within the party between those who support a critical approach and those basically willing to go a long with the Canadian foreign policy establishment. Unfortunately, the latter group has generally determined the NDP’s international policy.

At its 1949 convention the CCF, the NDP’s predecessor, passed a resolution supporting the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Even worse, the party also expelled two elected legislators who were critical of NATO.

While officially the West’s response to an aggressive Soviet Union, in fact NATO was established to blunt the European Left and extend North American/European power in light of the de-colonization taking place in Asia and the Middle East. NATO planners feared a weakening of self-confidence among Western Europe’s elite and the widely held belief that communism was the wave of the future. External Minister Lester Pearson was fairly open about NATO’s purpose telling the House of Commons in March 1949: “The power of the communists, wherever that power flourishes, depends upon their ability to suppress and destroy the free institutions that stand against them. They pick them off one by one: the political parties, the trade unions, the churches, the schools, the universities, the trade

associations, even the sporting clubs and the kindergartens. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is meant to be a declaration to the world that this kind of conquest from within will not in the future take place amongst us.” Tens of thousands of North American troops were stationed in Western Europe to deter any “conquest from within”.

The other major motivating factor for the North American elite was a desire to rule the world. For Canadian officials the north Atlantic pact justified European/North American dominance across the globe. As part of the parliamentary debate over NATO Pearson said: “There is no better way of ensuring the security of the Pacific Ocean at this particular moment than by working out, between the great democratic powers, a security arrangement the effects of which will be felt all over the world, including the Pacific area.”

In the eyes of Pearson and the US leadership NATO’s first major test took place far from the north Atlantic in Korea. After the Communists took control of China in 1949 the US tried to encircle the country. They supported Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan, built military bases in Japan, backed a right-wing dictator in Thailand and tried to establish a pro-Western state in Vietnam. The success of China’s nationalist revolution also spurred the 1950-1953 Korean War in which eight Canadian warships and 27,000 Canadian troops participated. The war left as many as four million dead.

The 1950 CCF convention endorsed Canada’s decision to join the US-led (though UN sanctioned) war in Korea. It wasn’t until huge numbers had died and China entered the war that the CCF started questioning Ottawa’s military posture.

In the early 1950s Iranians pushed to gain greater benefit from their huge oil reserves. But the British had different plans. As one of the earliest sources of Middle Eastern oil, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (British Petroleum’s predecessor) had generated immense wealth for British investors since 1915.

With Anglo-Iranian refusing to concede any of their immense profits, Iran moved to nationalize the country’s oil industry. It was a historic move that made Iran the first former colony to reclaim its oil.

Despite calling for the nationalization of numerous sectors of the Canadian economy, the leader of the CCF criticized Iran’s move. On October 22 1951 M.J. Coldwell told the House of Commons: “What happened recently in Iran [the nationalization of oil] and is now taking place in Egypt [abrogation of a treaty that allowed British forces to occupy the Suez Canal region] is an attempt on the part of these reactionary interests to use the understandable desire of the great masses of the people for improvements in their condition as an excuse to obtain control of the resources of these countries and to continue to exploit the common people in these regions.” The CCF leader then called on the federal government to “give every possible aid to the United Kingdom in the present crisis.”

Mohammad Mossadegh’s move to nationalize Iran’s oil would lead the US and UK to orchestrate his overthrow in 1953. The CCF failed (or at least it’s not recorded in the Hansard parliamentary debate) to criticize Ottawa for backing the overthrow of Iran’s first popularly elected Prime Minister.

No issue better reflects international policy tensions within the party than Israel/Zionism. Initially the CCF opposed the nationalism and imperialism associated with Zionism. In 1938 CCF leader J.S. Woodsworth, stated: “It was easy for Canadians, Americans and the British to

agree to a Jewish colony, as long as it was somewhere else. Why 'pick on the Arabs' other than for 'strategic' and 'imperialistic' consideration." At its 1942 convention the CCF condemned Nazi anti-Semitism but refused to endorse Zionism. "The Jewish problem can be solved only in a socialist and democratic society, which recognized no racial or class differences," explained a party resolution.

But before Israel's creation the CCF officially endorsed the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. In September 1945 new CCF leader M. J. Coldwell said the Zionist record in Palestine "in terms of both social and economic justice" spoke for itself. Three decades later, in 1975, NDP MP and former leader Tommy Douglas told Israel's racist Histadrut labour federation, "The main enmity against Israel is that she has been an affront to those nations who do not treat their people and their workers as well as Israel has treated hers." This speech was made eight years into Israel's occupation of the West Bank, Golan Heights and Gaza Strip and a quarter century after 800,000 Palestinians were ethnically cleansed during the 1948 war.

While better today, this extreme deference to Israel has yet to be expunged from the party. In May 2008 the soon-to-be NDP leader, Thomas Mulcair, was quoted in the Canadian Jewish News saying, "I am an ardent supporter of Israel in all situations and in all circumstances."

The NDP ought to shake off its history of supporting the Canadian foreign policy establishment. Beyond the moral imperative, sticking to mild and safe criticisms may be a losing electoral strategy.

Forceful and creative criticism of the Conservatives' foreign policy could be a way to pushback against Jason Kenney's successful outreach with immigrant communities (more than 20% of Canadians are born outside the country). The Conservatives have played off the fact that immigrant communities are generally more socially conservative. While this may be true, individuals with a strong connection to another country would also tend to be less supportive of Western domination, which the Conservatives have strongly pushed.

Additionally, Harper's foreign policy has been designed to please the most reactionary sectors of the party's base — evangelical Christians, right-wing Jews, Islamophobes, the military-industrial-complex as well as mining and oil executives. To a certain extent the Conservatives view international policy as a relatively low political cost way to please the party's right wing base (the clearest example of them taking a more extreme position on foreign policy is the Conservatives' refusal to give Canadian aid to projects abroad that include abortions — even for rape victims — but Harper strongly opposes efforts to challenge abortion domestically).

Could this same thinking not work for the NDP? Is there not a counter block of individuals and organizations focused on issues ranging from international climate negotiations to Palestine, global peace to mining justice? Wouldn't a forceful and principled NDP position on these issues help galvanize party activists?

With average Canadians more knowledgeable and interested in international affairs than ever before, it is likely. But party strategists fear that the dominant media will lambaste the NDP for expressing forthright criticism on many international issues. The media would. But the growth of online news and global television stations makes it easier than ever — if the party cared to try — to defend critical positions on issues such as the recent coup in Egypt or Canada's indifference to Paul Kagame's murderous escapades in the East of the Congo.

Ultimately, the options for the NDP is reasonably straightforward: work to create an electoral strategy that significantly improves Canadian foreign policy or continue to make opportunistic appeals to veterans, the military and those who believe a “Time Magazine version” of international affairs. The latter option is tantamount to being complicit with current policies and — if elected — becoming the agent of a pro-corporate/pro-empire Canadian foreign policy.

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