

# What Is the Left in Canada?

## Review of Yves Engler's Left, Right

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*A claim to righteousness in international affairs is fundamental to Canadian exceptionalism, the idea that this country is morally superior to other nations. — Yves Engler [1]*

In early August of this year, the Canadian minister of foreign affairs, Chrystia Freeland, tweeted for Saudi Arabia to release human rights activists. This greatly angered the Saudis who issued a series of sanctions that included selling off Saudi assets in Canada, ceasing purchases of Canadian wheat and barley, expelling Canada's ambassador, suspending all Saudi Arabian Airlines flights to and from Toronto, and ordering Saudi students to leave Canadian schools.

So far Canadian government officials have not responded other than to state Canada will continue to speak out on human rights abuses. That Canada speaks about human rights abuses comes across as rank hypocrisy to some Canadians. Given that Canada exists through a [genocide against its Original Peoples](#); given that Canada is a partner in US imperialist wars; given that Canadian corporations, especially mining corporations, have been exploiting the third world whereby do Canadian officials living in their government greenhouse deign to cast rocks at other houses?

Canada touts itself as a multicultural land that embraces diversity. Canada tends to [align itself](#) more so with the Scandinavian welfare-state model rather than the rugged individualism of its neighboring United States. And Canada has a politically represented Left, or what purports to be a Left, in the New Democratic Party (NDP) — even a Communist Party and Marxist-Leninist Party, although neither are electorally successful.

Yves Engler has written *Left, Right: Marching to the Beat of Imperial Canada* (Black Rose Books, 2018) which examines the Left in Canada. I tend to use the term [progressivism](#) because it refers to a grouping "that encompasses a wide spectrum of social movements that include environmentalism, labor, agrarianism, anti-poverty, peace, anti-racism, civil rights, women's rights, animal rights, social justice and political ideologies such as anarchism, communism, socialism, social democracy, and liberalism." The term *the Left* points to a bipolar split rather than a spectrum. Nonetheless, progressivism and the Left are referring toward a similar orientation.

In *Left, Right* Engler examines the NDP (and its earlier incarceration as the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation or CCF), the labor movement, leftist institutions, and leftist personalities (and other actors) for just how leftist or left-leaning they actually are. If one self-identifies as Left, then it seems perfectly reasonable that one should adhere to leftist

principles. Actions will define a social/political orientation with greater clarity than words (which are also important). To belong to a party deemed leftist which then pursues right-wing policies presents a contradiction — and in the worst case, exposes one to criticism for hypocrisy.

Engler critiques the CCF/NDP for its militarist support, lack of compassion for foreign workers, and moral corruption of its leaders. For instance, NDP stalwart “Stephen Lewis was stridently anti-Palestinian,” writes Engler. (p 31) Ex-federal NDP leader Tom Mulcair was a front-and-center Zionist. Engler notes that another ex-federal NDP leader Jack Layton was passionate about the role of Canada’s military in Afghanistan. (p 35)

Engler asks,

Has the desire of some in the NDP to replace the Liberals as the slightly leftist alternative to the Conservatives caused the party to move so far to the right that it agrees with Canada being a partner in enforcing imperialism? If so, what sort of home does it offer to those who oppose US Empire and all forms of imperialism? (p 48)

This reviewer does not consider any major Canadian party to be Left. The Conservatives are staunchly neoliberal. Ditto for the Liberals (just a bite less to the Right than the Conservatives). The NDP also are a Right of Center party. Their lack of internationalism, support for militarism, racism among leaders, etc locate them at a great distance from [leftist principles](#). At best the NDP are faux-Left.

The labor movement has also seen jingoism, militarism, racism among labor leaders, anti-communism, and a lack of solidarity (a *sine qua non* for the dignity of labor).

Engler writes that the Right has caught the ear of many labor leaders. (p 86-94)

Even “left-wing” think tanks bend to the Right, as do “leftist” critics. Engler notes that the Rideau Institute’s support for “peace-keeping” plays into mythologizing [Canada as a peaceful kingdom](#) while aligning with military objectives. (p 99)

As far as I can tell, major Canadian peacekeeping missions have always received support from Washington. Ignoring the power politics often driving peacekeeping missions has resulted in (unwitting) support for western imperialism. (p 100)

The author dispels the obfuscation of corporate/state media and its purveyors to cut through disinformation that has captured some of the “leftist” imagination. Engler shreds the role of a good Canada historically and more contemporaneously, among others, in supporting Zionism, the US-France-Canada orchestrated coup in Haiti, as well as the lauded (nauseatingly by corporate/state media) Canadian general Roméo Dallaire who twisted the genocide in Rwanda. Dallaire is a strong proponent of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, a cover for western imperialism. (p 176)

Even among Original Peoples — traditionally considered, in at least a societal sense as leftist [2] — have seen their “leaders” support militarism, colonialism, imperialism, corporate plunder, and environmental degradation. Engler says an online search will reveal the

Assembly of First Nations insouciance about how Canadian policy impacts on rest of the world. (p 179) The Assembly of First Nations is, however, problematic insofar as being viewed as a legitimate representative of Original Peoples. (p 192) [3]

The Left treads a slippery slope when it agrees with or takes up right-wing causes such as militarism, acquiescing when environmental destruction is at stake, and failure to support solidarity networks outside Canada. Engler broaches the antidote which is genius in its simplicity and obviousness: the Do No Harm principle backed by the Golden Rule.

Yet contrariwise Engler opines, “Canadian soldiers have only fought in one morally justifiable war: World War II.” (p 52) No explanation is proffered by the author for this opinion. One wonders how the Do No Harm principle was satisfied by Canadians fighting overseas? Also Engler’s contention of a *morally justifiable* [4] war is challengeable, and it is challenged by history professor Jacques Pauwels in his book *The Myth of the Good War*. [5]

Engler writes in a very readable style, and his work is solidly backed by sourcing. Most saliently, his work has a moral core. *Left, Right* is important and valuable in that it does not only illustrate and lament the corruption of leftist principles, but it also provides solutions about how leftist principles can be upheld; pushing the Left leftwards.

Read *Left, Right* and find out about how the NDP can be made relevant on the Left, about how to increase public awareness, and about how to grow the leftist movement.

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## Notes

1. *Left, Right: Marching to the Beat of Imperial Canada* (Black Rose Books, 2018): 151.
2. This was anathema for colonialism and its capitalist ideology. “The communal—they [colonialists who decided that “the Indians were to be individualized and completely Americanized” (p 3)] called them ‘communistic’—patterns of the Indians were an affront to their sensibilities. Unless the Indian could be trained to be selfish, they felt there was little hope of civilizing and assimilating them.” In Francis Paul Prucha (ed), *Americanizing the American Indians* (Harvard University Press, 1973): 8.
3. Something pointed out by Indigenous warrior Splitting the Sky: “The Assembly of First Nations is a neo-colonial elected system and their Chiefs are dependent on federal funds, therefore they are considered as collaborators of a foreign power.” In *Splitting the Sky with She Keeps the Door, From Attica to Gustafsen Lake* (Chase, BC: John Boncore Hill, 2001): 84. [Review](#).
4. The language is slippery here because Engler does not state that WWII was morally justified, just indicating that moral justifications could be made. But is that not true for almost any war? And do not the war-initiating nations invariably purport some sort of moral rationale to justify aggression?
5. E.g., US motivations during WWII were based on corporate interests: “... the US power elite is motivated first and foremost by economic interests, by business interests... (p 240; see also p 29-41); not on fighting fascism as GIs “first became acquainted with fascist (or at least quasi-fascist) practices, in the form of petty mistreatments and humiliations.... The American soldiers had not wanted this war, and they did not fight for the beautiful ideas of

freedom, justice, and democracy; they fought to survive, to win the war in order to end it, in order to be able to leave the army, in order to be able to go home.” (p 22) In Jacques R. Pauwels, *The Myth of the Good War*(Toronto: Lorimer, 2015).

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