

## ***Lessons for Americans:*** **The NDP Victory in Ontario**

**Elaine Bernard**

THE SURPRISE ELECTION VICTORY IN 1990 of the social-democratic, New Democratic Party (NDP), in Canada's industrial heartland of Ontario was an event almost completely ignored in the US, in spite of daily headlines about the fall of "socialist" regimes around the world and weekly editorials announcing an end to "socialism." Because of the lack of material on the Ontario NDP victory, this article will detail the events leading up to the election, and the program of the new government.

It will also discuss some of the lessons to be learned from the experience of the NDP in Canada. In particular, the example of the Canadian labor movement and left building and supporting their own political party, rather than attempting to influence from within one of the two older parties. At a time when US labor points to the more progressive labor laws in Canada, and many Americans look enviously at Canada's comprehensive and universal system of national health care, it is equally important that progressives take a second look at the distinct advantages of having their own political party.

Even if you carefully followed the media this past summer and fall, most Americans heard very little about a rather remarkable election just after Labor Day: the surprising provincial election victory of the New Democratic Party in the industrial heartland, Ontario. This first ever NDP government in Ontario has national significance and marks a dramatic altering of the political landscape in Canada.

Ontario is unquestionably Canada's most important province, accounting for more than one-third of the population and producing close to half the country's GNP. While the NDP has won provincial elections in Western Canada, governing at different times the provinces of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, British Columbia and currently the Yukon, the Ontario victory has made the party a serious contender for power nationally at a time of growing uncertainty and crisis within the country.

Of the 73 Members of the Provincial Parliament that make up the newly-elected NDP government, 27 are trade union activists and 19 are women. They are steel workers, teachers, auto workers, hospital workers, communications workers, pulp workers, public employees from municipal, provincial and

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federal agencies, and union staff. It rather fits the real meaning of the description, "for the people, by the people." Not a banker in their midst, and only seven lawyers, as one Canadian economist lamented.

In light of the significance of the election of a social democratic government directly north of New York, Michigan and Minnesota, it is interesting to note the silence in the United States. While proudly proclaiming the fall of "socialist" governments from Prague to Managua, the national media prefer to keep people in the US in the dark about the rising popularity of a democratic socialist alternative in Canada. The newspaper of record, the *New York Times*, for example, did not even mention the election victory until almost a month later. The *Wall Street Journal*, on the other hand, quickly queried the intelligence of Ontarian voters, asking if "they get their news from Eastern Europe by dog sled?"

Back in Ontario, the newly elected Premier Bob Rae rejected the far fetched attempts to link his government with the failed regimes in Eastern Europe. "Like millions of others around the world," commented Rae, "I have cheered the triumph of popular democracy in Eastern Europe. But I refuse to interpret those astonishing events as a vindication of capitalism, or a repudiation of anything I would call democratic socialism." Small wonder the US media would prefer to ignore Rae and the NDP victory.

In Ontario and the rest of Canada, the media could hardly ignore this election victory. The Canadian media immediately attempted to undermine the new government's mandate by suggesting that its election reflects "a simple, unfocused, protest vote." Echoing a similar trend attributed to US voters, the Canadian media argued that the Ontario election did not reflect a vote for the NDP, but a vote against the Liberals. Rae and the New Democrats rejected this analysis arguing that "it was an election . . . not a sneak attack."

In attempting to label the election a protest vote, the media is seeking to undermine the party's mandate for change. In a remarkable editorial in Canada's national weekly magazine, *Macleans*, entitled "The Road To Anarchy," editor Kevin Doyle linked the Ontario election to a general malaise throughout the country. Quoting Yale political scientist Robert Dahl, anarchy is explained as "a society consisting only of purely voluntary associations, a society without a state." Canadians, Doyle tells us, "feel they can now protect their own interests better than governments can and, in fact, that government, in the traditional sense, is no longer necessary." This he assures us, "is not anarchy — but it is an exceptionally serious concern." In the post Cold War period, when anti-communism does not appear to work its old magic, the specter of anarchism has been resurrected in an attempt to frighten an increasingly politically active citizenry.

In a good sense, the warning about the "threat" of "voluntary associations" replacing the state is not as off-the-wall as it might first appear. In the case of the Ontario victory, the popular movements and voluntary associations, including unions, environmentalist, women's organizations, native people, minorities, and people of color, all contributed to the demise of the

provincial Liberal government. One hopes that the many activists who have been elected as part of the new government will maintain their links to the popular movements, and insist that the public policy of the new government strengthens and expands the role of the grassroots movements so vital to social transformation.

WHEN THE LIBERAL GOVERNMENT OF DAVID PETERSON called a summer election in Ontario, no political current, including the NDP, expected such a dramatic conclusion. Peterson had lead the Liberals (the left of center party of business) in two other provincial election campaigns, first kicking out the Progressive Conservatives (the right of center party of business) who had ruled the province for 42 years, and then in a subsequent election in 1987 winning a decisive majority. But in a parliamentary political system where governments have the power to call elections before their term runs out, politicians are often tempted to go to the polls while things look good.

At the beginning of summer, Peterson had the highest voter approval rating of any government in Canada, over 50%. The NDP was trailing far behind with 26% of the vote, and the Conservatives, burdened by their association with the highly unpopular Conservative federal government, were behind the NDP. But with a scandal over a Liberal fundraiser's misuse of charitable donations for political influence about to go to court and Ontario about to enter a recession, in spite of two years left in his mandate, Peterson decided on a summer election as a good bet for giving him another 5 year mandate.

From his first election press conference, which was disrupted by activists from Greenpeace, to failed attempts at redbaiting during the last few days of the campaign when the NDP surged ahead of the Liberals in the polls, the five-week election campaign was a tribute to the popular movements and a disaster for Peterson. The growing dissatisfaction with the Ontario Liberals and Peterson was not due to their being a particularly bad or irresponsible government by recent standards. In fact, through an accord with the NDP in the mid 1980s, they had passed some progressive legislation. But they were the first government caught in the growing political awareness and opposition developing in Canada since the passage of the Canada/US Free Trade Agreement and the failed attempt at constitutional restructuring proposed in the Meech Lake accord.

The Meech Lake accord, which had been cooked up by the ten provincial premiers and the prime minister, sought to bring the Francophone province of Quebec into the Canadian constitution fold by recognizing Quebec as a "distinct society," and extending to all provinces extensive rights which would make universal national programs, so cherished in Canada, very difficult, if not impossible in the future. In addition, the Meech Lake proposal would have established that Canada was founded by only two nations, one English and one French. The two nations formula was an insult to aboriginal peoples and their demands for national recognition and self-determination.

Ongoing public debates throughout the country over the last few years have

forced Canadians into a far-ranging discussion about the nature of their society, social programs, constitution, economic treaties, and indeed, the social contract that underlies Canadian society. From the continuing discussion of Free Trade and its implications for the economy, through the Meech Lake Accord and the restructuring of the Canadian state, to the dramatic 3-month Native barricade at Oka, Quebec, (spurred by anger over decades of government indifference to the demand for settlement of land claims and self-government) many of the fundamental assumptions of Canadian society are now undergoing significant change.

THE DEBATE ON FREE TRADE, IN PARTICULAR, moved Canadians toward a new receptivity to social democratic ideas and policies. As the center piece of a neo-conservative economic agenda in Canada, Free Trade has become the justification for structural changes in the economy which have included an accelerated move to deregulation and privatization, and decreased social services. The Canadian labor movement representing 37% of the work force, has been more successful than US labor in resisting the neo-conservative/business agenda of deregulation, privatization, and an overall shifting of the economic burden of global restructuring of markets and increased competition onto the backs of working people. Labor in Canada, with its own political party, the NDP, has been more successful in preventing the Tory ideology glorifying free markets and opposing social intervention in corporate decision-making from dominating all political discourse in the country.

But the Free Trade Agreement which came into effect on January 1, 1989, has already begun to significantly change the balance of forces within the country. It has relinquished Canadian sovereignty on many economic matters and moved Canadian business toward economic integration with the US while acting as a cover for yet another attack against universal social programs. In opposing the demands of the business agenda, a growing number of Canadians have demonstrated a new openness to the idea that the role of the state should be to assure the welfare of the citizens, not simply to create an environment within which business can prosper. This is the essence of the NDP's social democratic approach, and it appears to have found new fertile ground in the summer election in Ontario.

According to NDP campaign strategists, Peterson was "caught out." He knew bad times were approaching, but had judged that the recession would hit in the fall. However, many working people were already hurting by the summer. According to the Canadian Labor Congress, for example, over 150,000 jobs have been lost in Canada because of the Canada/US Free Trade agreement, and most of them were in Ontario. By tearing down the tariff wall between Canada and the US and by assuring US corporations "national treatment" in Canada, with the passage of the Free Trade deal many US corporations simply shut down their Canadian plants and shipped products to Canada from their US plants duty-free.

The NDP campaigned on the populist terrain of "fairness" and compassion

“for ordinary working families.” But the traditional social democratic stand of increased government services financed by fairer taxes seemed to find new life in post-Free Trade Ontario. Rae’s promise to introduce “a minimum tax on corporations and new taxes on large inheritances and real estate speculation,” addressed the growing concerns of Ontarians that throughout the last decade the social wage of working people has been declining while corporate profits continue to soar. A strength of the NDP campaign was its ability to address the tax issue in a progressive and anti-corporate fashion by focusing working peoples’ anger about taxes onto the terrain of social justice.

Environmental issues also figured prominently in the NDP campaign. Proposing an Environmental Bill of Rights, the party effectively argued that because it was not linked to business, it would not be soft on corporate polluters.

Another area where the NDP promised to take on business, was on the issue of car insurance. At the time of the election, the Liberals were in the process of introducing a no-fault private insurance scheme which would do little for consumers, but be highly profitable for the insurance companies since it removed the right of accident victims to sue for damages. As an alternative to the Liberals’ plan, the NDP promised a publicly owned car insurance system with the right to sue.

Despite the fact that Canadians have enjoyed a comprehensive national health care system for close to 30 years (first introduced at the provincial level by an NDP government) and that there is a strong tradition of “public ownership” in many sectors of the economy including the media, insurance, and (in some provinces) even financial services, proposing public enterprise as a viable alternative to free market forces is still an uphill battle. But, overall, Canadians have remained more sympathetic to universal comprehensive programs and public enterprise than Americans.

SINCE TAKING OFFICE IN EARLY OCTOBER 1990, the new government has been working on translating its election platform into a legislative agenda. The first general elaboration of this program was given in the “Throne Speech” of November 20. (The Throne Speech is a tradition in parliamentary systems where at the beginning of a new session of parliament, the ceremonial head of state — in Ontario’s case the Lieutenant Governor — reads a type of “state of the union” address outlining the government’s program for the coming session.) Some of the key points of the government’s program include immediate action to help stimulate the economy, including \$700 million to create jobs through public works, such as maintaining roads and public buildings. This spending, the government has assured, will occur despite Ontario’s \$2.5 billion deficit. (There are no legislative demands or voter initiatives that provincial governments must present balanced budgets in Canada.) A number of programs have been outlined for some of the poorest paid workers. Daycare workers, for example, have been promised an immediate pay hike, with a universal pay equity scheme to follow. The government has promised to increase the

minimum wage to 60% of the average industrial wage in Ontario. This would set the minimum wage at \$7.40.

The labor movement has been assured that the new government will amend the provincial labor code to remove some of the barriers to unionization, and it will initiate a wage protection fund to ensure that workers are paid when companies go bankrupt. The labor code will also be amended to assure that workers will get improved notices of layoffs, and public employees will have political rights extended to them.

The Throne Speech promised programs on a wide variety of issues which had mobilized popular opposition to the Liberal government. The NDP government promised to encourage the hiring of minorities and to work towards more self-government for native people. Women have been promised improved pregnancy and parental leave, and the government has said they will take measures to reduce violence against women. It has also promised welfare reforms to "address the shame of child poverty in the midst of affluence."

While they have permitted the completion of a nuclear plant already in construction, they have announced a freeze on new nuclear power development. The Throne Speech reiterated the election promise to legislate an Environmental Bill of Rights designed to give individuals more control over their environment, and to adopt higher standards for the quality of drinking water.

Working from the experience of other NDP provincial governments which have introduced publicly-owned auto insurance systems, the NDP government in Ontario has promised to scrap the Liberal plan and move quickly toward a publicly owned system.

On taxes, the NDP will be setting up a "fair tax" commission which will outline a blueprint for a more equitable tax system. While the idea of a minimum tax for corporations was as discussed in the election platform, this issue will be only one of many options looked at by the "fair tax" commission.

While there is not as yet much detail on any of these proposals, Ontarians have been promised that the individual ministers responsible for various areas will be making more detailed announcements unveiling the new programs throughout the winter and spring.

There are, of course, a number of important constraints on the government in implementing these programs. Based on the experience of NDP governments in other provinces, one of the most significant constraints will be the opposition within, e.g. the senior government officials. There is a tradition in Canada of a professional civil service extending to the highest levels in government departments. In practice, civil servants are accountable to the Minister (in the parliamentary system, always an elected Member of Parliament who is appointed by the first Minister — in the case of Ontario, the Premier, Bob Rae). In reality, these bureaucrats run the department and can and have made ministers look like incompetent fools. Historically, the NDP has been hesitant to make a clean sweep of the bureaucracy, often leaving many senior government positions in the hands of people actively hostile to the new governments program and values.

A second, equally important, constraint will be business opposition to most of the new government's program. While it is not a particularly radical program of social reconstruction, business will see it as a counter-productive interference in the marketplace. While business was slow off the mark in the elections, not expecting an NDP victory, it now has a number of years to unite the opposition to the NDP in the province.

Again, the experience of other NDP provincial governments can be instructive in dealing with this problem. Once in government, the NDP often fails to mobilize labor and popular support for its reforms. While Liberal and Conservative governments proudly promote pro-business programs and initiatives, the NDP tends to try to be "fair" and "even-handed." In this misguided attempt at "balance," NDP governments can often become more hostile to the popular movements than explicitly "pro-business" governments. NDP governments perceive the popular movements as forcing the government to go too quickly. The history of social democracy is littered with fights between the mass base of the party demanding implementation of the party's program and its isolated, unresponsive government under siege by its own base.

Finally, there is the wider economic environment in which the NDP has come to power. While Ontario is the industrial heartland of the country, it has just entered a recession and is running a large deficit. There will be tremendous pressure on the government to postpone issues of equality and social justice until the current recession has passed.

Yet, in spite of these constraints, there are some grounds for optimism. First, many of the reforms proposed are not necessarily expensive. Indeed, many of the social justice issues are non-cost items. Second, the new Ontario government is the most female and labor intensive of any in Canadian history. Never before have Canadians elected a government with so many legislators directly linked to the rank and file of the labor and popular movements. To highlight only two of the many MPPs elected in this sweep, Marion Boyd, who is now Minister of Education, defeated Premier David Peterson in his own parliamentary seat. Boyd is a feminist who was director of a shelter for battered women and children. The new Minister in charge of Community and Social Services, Zanana Akande, a school principal, has taught at University of Toronto and York University, and has been a leader in the black community in Toronto. Women account for almost half of the new cabinet, holding 11 out of 25 positions.

But in the final analysis, the success, or failure, of the Ontario government is not just in the hands of its elected officials. It is also in the hands of the community activists both inside and outside the party. It is vital that these groups work to keep the government moving on its promised reforms. Business will certainly be vocal in its opposition to the NDP program. The only power strong enough to counter this business pressure will be widespread public activism demanding social justice.

THE ELECTION OF A SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT IN ONTARIO should be a

tremendous inspiration to working people here in the US. It shows that even in part of the industrial center of North America, there are opportunities for democratic socialist programs and ideas to be given a wide hearing and acceptance.

The new government was elected as a result of years of diligent work by thousands of community-based activists who risked being marginalized by building a "third party." In the words of US labor leader and socialist Eugene V. Debs, they decided that it was better "to vote for something they wanted, and not get it, rather than vote for something they didn't want and get it."

While political models and experience cannot be transplanted completely from one country to another, there are lessons from the NDP victory in Ontario and the thirty-year history of the NDP's slow rise in influence in Canada that political activists in the United States can learn from.

The first, and most obvious conclusion, is that there is nothing "unAmerican" about a democratic socialist alternative. While it would dismay many Canadians to be characterized as similar to "Americans" the simple fact is that Canada and the US have much more in common than any two countries in the world. A simple case in point is that outside of Canada and the US, no one else in the world can tell the peoples apart. While a concerted effort has been made in the United States and Canada to brand socialist ideas as "foreign," the NDP and its predecessor, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, have their roots in homegrown radicalism, including western farm/labor alliances and protest movements, the social gospel, socialism and populism.

While Canada is unequivocally a separate and different country from the US, it is rather hard for the average American to see Canada as terribly "foreign." Somehow, social-democratic governments in Sweden, Australia, or Britain, seem a world apart. But Ontario, Canada? Get serious! Growing numbers of Americans are looking to Canada's labor laws, social programs, national health care and asking why similar policies cannot be adopted in the US.

The history of the NDP shows that disciplined parties do not necessarily need to win power in order to win reforms. While the 1990 victory is the first time the NDP has held power in Ontario, even in opposition, the party was not without influence. Even in opposition, for example, the NDP was able to influence the ruling parties and get programs implemented. While NDP provincial governments are credited with much of Canada's more progressive labor legislation, Tory and Liberal governments have been spurred by popular support for NDP policy to implement reforms first suggested by NDP election platforms. Of much interest to Americans is Canada's national health care program. This program of comprehensive, universal, national health care was first experimented with at a provincial level by the NDP government in Saskatchewan. The program proved so popular that the Federal Government constructed a national program extending the Saskatchewan plan principles throughout the country within 9 years of the NDP's introduction of the model.

Closer to home, a negative example, of how a minority can influence or block change is aptly shown in the case of the Dixiecrats, a powerful minority

within the Democratic party. These right-wing power brokers have been able to block progressive legislation in Congress and have contributed to the Democratic party moving further and further to the right. Clearly the right in America understands how a minority can influence the agenda of the majority.

The NDP example shows how a third party changes the political mathematics throughout the systems. One reason often cited for why a "third party" is not possible in the US is that the US system is a "winner take all" or "first through the gate system." But, this is also true of Canada. Neither the US nor Canada has proportional representation, unlike many European countries. But even in our winner take all systems, third parties can have tremendous influence. In three-way races (and four- and five-way races), as is common in Canada, candidates most often win elections with less than 50% of the vote. One might also point out that they also do in the US, though the most rapidly growing voting trend here is abstention. In the US, the Democrats know that they can ignore the demands of labor, minorities, women, and other progressive groups because these people feel they have no alternative to the Democrats. So progressives are forced, over and over again, to vote "lesser of evils" politics and end up with the "evil of lessers."

A third party immediately changes the equation. With few issues differentiating Democrat from Republican candidates, the Canadian example shows that a progressive third candidate can garner votes from their own base, plus a minority of votes from both old political parties and end up "first through the gate" as Bernie Sanders aptly proved in Vermont in 1990.

At the moment, few American politicians worry about a challenge from the left. Almost the whole electoral political terrain in the US is dominated by minute shades of differences on the right and "personality." The NDP example shows that a challenge from the left widens the entire political spectrum.

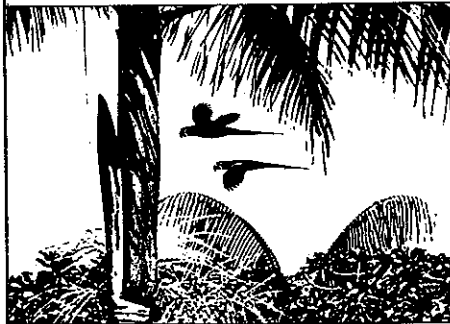
But beyond winning and losing elections, one of the most important things that parties do is help to set the political agenda in a country. Political parties help define what is considered a legitimate political issue, how politics are conducted and what relations and conflicts may be resolved through the political process. For the labor movement in particular, the NDP, as labor's political arm, assists labor in shaping and putting forward its concerns and making them part of the national agenda. In contrast to its "special interest" status in the US, the labor movement in Canada is able to widen the sphere of issues and concerns that should be politically addressed.

In addition to helping shape the national political agenda, the NDP is a political coalition which provides a permanent structure for labor and other progressive groups, such as the women's movement, environmentalists, minorities, students and the peace movement to work together. While there is constant tension within the party rooted in the very different organizational practices and beliefs of groups and individuals affiliated with the NDP, it serves as a vehicle for organizations to work together politically, to influence each other, and enhance mutual dialogue, at the same time providing the necessary pressure and cohesion to keep these disparate groups together.

Central to political cohesion in the NDP is the concept of a membership party. The Democrats, and indeed, even the Republicans are not political parties by any meaningful definition. While accountability of elected members continues to be an area of tension within the NDP, few NDPers would trade the discipline of a party, with a program, membership, internal educational functions, and actions beyond electoralism for the party registration system in the US.

The challenge of building a durable, broadly based, progressive political party has seemed overwhelming to US progressives in the latter part of the twentieth century. While some will choose to ignore the success of the NDP and the experience of Canadian progressives in building a party based on popular movements and independent of business, others may be inspired by the example. With all its flaws, NDP shows that a democratic socialist alternative can be built and thrive, even in North America.

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