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Canadian State

# Alberta's Orange Crush

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**The New Democratic Party's (NDP) surprise landslide victory in the provincial elections in Alberta on May 5 sent a shockwave through Canadian politics. With over 40 percent of the vote and an outright majority in the provincial legislature, the NDP has broken the Conservative Party's decades-long dominance of Alberta politics and lifted hopes that Stephen Harper, Canada's right-wing prime minister, might be ousted in this fall's federal elections.**

The NDP's victory in the heartland of Canadian conservatism is cause for celebration. However, there is little indication that the party's success at the polls marks a fundamental shift to the left in provincial or federal politics. Alberta remains a deeply conservative province dominated by powerful oil and gas companies, and the NDP's neoliberal record in other provinces raises questions about its willingness to follow through on its election platform's progressive demands.

Jacobin contributing editor Chris Maisano conducted an email interview with the Canadian activist and academic Herman Rosenfeld to help us make sense of the election and to assess the prospects for the Canadian left moving forward.

**Many readers in the US and internationally may not be familiar with the history of the New Democratic Party (NDP). Where did it come from, and what does it stand for?**

The NDP was formed in 1961, as a project by the Canadian Labour Congress and a political party called the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). The CCF was the country's premier social-democratic party, founded in 1932, in Alberta of all places. It championed many of the social welfare reforms associated with that movement, and although it never was elected federally, the CCF government of Saskatchewan, elected in 1944 under the leadership of Tommy Douglas, initiated North America's first public Medicare program.

The CCF, unfortunately, engaged in red-baiting during the Cold War, and with the mainstream Liberal Party co-opting many of its traditional demands, it ran out of gas by the late 1950s. Also, the party was never successful in developing deep roots in the labor movement. A project to create a new party (partly to move it more to the political center at the time), with the active participation of the Canadian Labour Congress was begun and resulted in the creation of the New Democratic Party. Its first leader (1961–1971) was the celebrated Douglas.

It remained a standard-bearer of traditional social-democratic demands, acting as a kind of conscience of Canadian politics (for example, opposing Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's use of the War Measures Act against Quebec activists) and working to implement improvements in the country's weak welfare state provisions.

But like every social-democratic party on the planet, it was unable to stand up to the neoliberal onslaught that began to intensify in the 1970s, and where it was elected it ended up accepting the limitations of neoliberal capitalism: waffling on free trade; accepting that there could be no alternative to private capital accumulation as the basis of economic activity; balanced budgets; and in the Canadian context "in the face of the realities of climate change" not working to replace the economy's reliance on the extraction and export of fossil fuels.

Today, it stands for moderate but useful reforms when out of power. But when in power provincially (it has never been elected to run a federal government), it tends to implement a more moderate neoliberal agenda. Interestingly, in

the last federal election of 2011, on the strength of huge (and quite unique) gains in the province of Quebec, the NDP became the official opposition party on the federal level, eclipsing the traditional ruling party of Canada, the Liberals.

### **What is the current balance of political forces inside the party, both nationally and in Alberta?**

The NDP is not socialist, and its political center of gravity — the dominant forces within it — argue for a fairer distribution of wealth, modest extension of social programs (themselves soundly attacked by the hardline, austerity-driven neoliberal government of Stephen Harper), opposition to some of the more authoritarian elements of the ruling Conservative agenda, and limits to the pipelines that would send tar sands oil to the US for refining.

They in no way oppose the entire oil and gas extractive economy, challenge the power of the financial sector, or look to end the free trade regime which facilitates much of Canadian neoliberalism. Like many such parties, the leader and those around him make most of the policies, and Tom Mulcair — the current leader — is an adept campaigner and parliamentarian, but is no socialist. He is moderate, careful, and seeks to balance different forces within the party.

There is an “old guard” that opposed Mulcair’s leadership. It had closer ties to top labor leaders and led the party for the past generation. There are few policy differences between these groups, and they settled in quite nicely behind Mulcair. Much of the NDP’s electoral support is in Quebec and urban centers in central Canada.

There is no substantial left within the party, although there is a minority of left social democrats who are increasingly nervous about the party’s unwillingness to tax the wealthy, challenge austerity, free trade, finance, or the oil and gas industry. They have little power and less voice in the party, which, although it has several policy conferences, uses them as safety valves and window dressing. In Alberta, most of the left has either worked with or supported the provincial NDP over the years, given the near-total dominance of right-wing parties and interest groups and the lack of any substantial left-wing political current.

The labor movement, through the Canadian Labour Congress, provincial federations, and individual union affiliates, remains in alliance with the party, but the unions often practice forms of strategic voting in order to keep the dreaded Conservatives out of office. Many unions remain the foot soldiers for NDP election campaigns, but the organic unity of the pre-neoliberal period is somewhat frayed, in the face of austerity and the employer onslaught in the private and public sectors.

The Alberta NDP is, like all provincial NDPs, independent of the federal party. They tend to have a more moderate platform, given the intense power and influence of the oil and gas elites and the over-five-decade dominance of conservative politics and ideology in that province (which is also home to Stephen Harper’s federal Conservatives).

I’m not all that familiar with the inner workings of the Alberta party, other than its attraction of a number of young, working-class and professional candidates, and its platform. However, the team of advisers who organized the party’s electoral victory included many of the centrist-oriented political operatives who worked to elect the so-called “Orange Crush” campaign of the late Jack Layton in the 2011 federal election. They are noted for crafting “safe” electoral messages.

In the recent election, it called for a public reconsideration of the royalty levels paid to the province by oil and gas companies; raising corporate taxes by 2 percent; raising the minimum wage to \$15 per hour by 2018; increasing rates of taxation on the wealthiest Albertans; and locally refining more of the oil extracted from the province (and ending experiments with coal carbon capture). It called for using funds originally intended for carbon capture technology development to be used for public transit; Alberta currently has the lowest corporate tax rates in Canada

and has no provincial sales tax.

The new premier, Rachel Notley, is the daughter of a former party leader and led a dogged and impressive campaign to win a majority, with a caucus that includes many young and inexperienced members. Though she supports the Energy East pipeline project, which would bring millions of barrels of tar sands crude oil to refineries in eastern Canada, she has thus far refused to travel around the US to sell plans for it.

**Alberta has long been the citadel of Canadian conservatism, and the NDP has long been a marginal force in the province. What allowed them to make such an unprecedented breakthrough?**

It was a combination of things, but their victory hardly represents a radical move to the left. The demographics of the province have changed over recent years, especially in the wake of hot-house development of the tar sands. The industry has attracted young working-class and professional people of different ethnic groups, changing the balance of forces especially in cities such as Edmonton, a historic center of more progressive movement culture in the province (local wits like to refer to it as "Redmonton").

There was also a lot of disgust with the cynicism, corruption, and policies of the provincial Conservatives. In the face of dramatically declining oil prices and the revenues derived from them, the province had huge financial issues.

The budget didn't look towards the industry or the wealthy to contribute. It cut health care, education, and other social services, none of which were lavishly funded even during the boom time of oil and gas revenues. People — especially the younger people who moved to Alberta in recent years — wanted a change. The NDP's honesty, Notley's personality, the moderate campaign, and the tawdriness of the Conservatives all contributed to this dramatic electoral shift.

The opposition — the party that came in second — is called Wildrose, and is a more radical neoliberal party akin to the US Tea Party. It attracted much of the hard right-wing conservatives, as well as some of the corporate oil and gas elite, and this further weakened the Conservatives.

**The NDP has formed provincial governments before, and their track record in many cases has not been particularly inspiring. What are the chances that the Alberta NDP government diverges from its neoliberal predecessors in Ontario, British Columbia, and elsewhere?**

This is a very positive victory, and a breach (albeit probably temporary) in the monotonous control that Conservative parties have had in Alberta, since the old days of prairie populism was supplanted by a more right-wing populism tied to oil and gas elites. One would have to be pretty cynical and hard-boiled not to feel good about this election. On the other hand, there is little reason to think that Rachel Notley's NDP won't end up reinforcing the neoliberal status quo over time.

But like other NDP governments the reality isn't so simple, and has certain complexities which demonstrate that while the provincial NDP governments certainly accept neoliberalism, they have provided some limited openings for the labor movement and other social movements.

In the case of Alberta, one would hope that the Alberta Federation of Labour (which has a long history of militancy and organizing) will organize at the grassroots to push the government to implement the more progressive elements of its platform. Social movements need to fight to support and expand underfunded social programs. Environmental activists (and especially eco-socialists) need to fight to limit and ultimately end the tar sands projects, and use what

has been extracted as a way to transition to renewables.

On the other hand, the overwhelming power of the oil and gas interests (most US and international energy conglomerate-owned) shape the form of capital accumulation in Alberta. Challenging them requires a radical anticapitalist perspective, which the NDP does not have.

Already, Notley has pledged to work in partnership with the industry. Of course, to be in a position to do the opposite would require building a base for an alternative set of policies within the working class, which in turn requires education, mobilization, and years of organizing. This is not what the NDP is, and the acceptance of the status quo as the framework for implementing their electoral program, especially in the context of the decline in oil prices, doesn't bode well for the medium and longer term.

### **How does the NDP's unexpected success in Alberta alter the political terrain heading into this fall's federal elections?**

I am not sure. Like many others, I think that beating the Conservatives in Harper's main bastion will certainly hurt them. Provincial and federal politics do not work in sync, but he will have to divert resources to address this breach. It also demonstrates that the political status quo can be changed (although how and what that means isn't clear). Just the idea that they can lose in their backyard is the subject of many a toast in progressive households across Canada this weekend.

### **What are the prospects of the Canadian left moving forward, both inside and outside the NDP?**

The Canadian left cannot move forward through the NDP. It represents a component of the left that accepts the precepts of the current system, austerity, the transformation of the state and labor markets that go along with neoliberalism, and the mantra of competitiveness.

The left has to operate independently, working to build a socialist movement "à la" which implies creating a working-class base, developing orientations in and through struggles that challenge capital and its logic. Of course, we should work with social-democratic activists and politicians who advocate for progressive reforms, and challenge them when they subordinate them to the needs of the system.

Alberta is a space where we need to push forward some of the reforms promised by Notley, but in a way that deepens our collective capacity to challenge capital in this, its heartland.

Interestingly, there are new and growing attempts to build links between different socialist and anticapitalist networks and projects across the country, and some interesting new experiments in Halifax, Ottawa, Toronto, Winnipeg, Quebec, and elsewhere.

Working in and around unions, working peoples' struggles in communities, and large political campaigns (such as efforts to raise Canada Pension levels, defending the postal service, opposing authoritarian limitations on rights, defending migrant and precarious workers, and supporting indigenous sovereignty struggles) are where we need to grow, not in the NDP.

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