

Quebec Left Debates Perspectives in Canada's Federal Election

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Region: [Canada](#)

Global Research, September 17, 2015

[Social Project](#) 17 September 2015

Canada's current federal election campaign is now at the half-way point in the lead-up to October 19. The three major parties are polling almost equally, with the ruling Conservative vote dropping steadily while the opposition New Democrats (NDP) and Liberals are virtually tied overall at just over 30 per cent. This means the NDP has not significantly increased its support from the previous election in 2011, while the Liberals under Justin Trudeau have staged a remarkable recovery from their 19 per cent in 2011. In Quebec, the NDP polls far ahead of the other parties and even beyond its 43 per cent support in 2011, but it is lagging behind the Liberals in most of the rest of Canada (ROC).

It is a depressing campaign, with little discussion of major issues in the corporate media. No party is offering a real alternative on such key issues as climate change, increasing neoliberal austerity, Canada's increasing militarization, etc.

As the Official Opposition in the last Parliament, the NDP was well poised for further advances this year. But its campaign, built entirely around the image of party leader Thomas Mulcair, is pathetically devoid of proposals that could inspire enthusiastic support in an electorate that by all accounts is overwhelmingly eager for "change."



[[Mike Constable](#)]

Incredibly, the party brass market Mulcair as a leader with "experience" in government - as a cabinet minister in the right-wing and federalist government headed by Jean Charest in Quebec, which Mulcair left only in 2008. And then there are his past statements on the record in [support of Margaret Thatcher](#). And now his inability to explain how an NDP government would abolish the Senate - which would of course require not just consent of all the provinces but a major amendment to the Constitution, something the NDP fears to do because it would once again put the "Quebec question" front and centre in Canadian politics. And so on and on....

What Can the Left Do?

What can the left do? Nowhere is this a more acute question than in Quebec where the largely pro-sovereignty left recognizes the need to engage with federal politics but is divided between the Bloc Québécois (BQ), which campaigns for independence as a Quebec-only federal party, and the federalist NDP, which currently holds most of the province's seats and is once again polling far ahead of the other parties including the BQ.

As a member of a collective (the Collectif d'analyse politique, or CAP) associated with the semi-annual journal [Nouveaux Cahiers du Socialisme](#), I was asked, along with a few others, to summarize my perspectives on the election in no more than 500 words for the September issue of our members-only bulletin, *Les nouvelles des NCS*. The five contributions published therein offer a glimpse of some of the ways in which these issues are being addressed in the Quebec left. The CAP will be discussing the election at its next meeting. Here is a summary of four contributions followed by an English version of mine.

Aurélie Lanctôt is a law student at McGill University, a graduate in journalism from the Université du Québec, and a blogger at [Ricochet](#) and [Voir](#), among other sites.

She focuses on the incoherencies in the NDP campaign, noting how Mulcair's previous right-wing positions conflict with the party's proposals (\$15 minimum wage, child care program, etc.), and emphasizes in particular his promise of a balanced budget beginning with his government's first term in office. "Thomas Mulcair seems more determined to fight the Right's mockery than he is about the legitimate concerns coming from his left, the NDP membership and potential sympathizers of the party.... By clinging to the goal of a balanced budget, despite everything, isn't Mulcair revealing that he has not completely abandoned his past political beliefs?"

Michel Roche is a professor of political science at the University of Quebec Chicoutimi campus and author of (inter alia) a stimulating essay, [La gauche et l'Indépendance du Québec](#).

He argues that more harm than good may result if Quebec progressives support the NDP in order to defeat Harper. He advocates a vote for the BQ, notwithstanding its "pro-free trade discourse." By supporting Quebec independence, the BQ alone signifies a "rupture" with the existing constitutional status quo, upheld by the NDP as well as the other parties. The Quebec independence movement, which he thinks is experiencing a revival under the new Parti Québécois leader Pierre-Karl Péladeau, scares the ruling class much more than the prospect of "an NDP government unable to renounce tar sands operations and their transmission to the East." Furthermore, another defeat of the BQ would "discourage the living forces of the independentist movement and fuel the federalist offensive of Quebec's Liberal government...."

Francine Pelletier, a bilingual journalist in print, TV and digital media, was a co-founder of the feminist magazine *La Vie en rose*. She blogs at [L'actualité en petites bouchées](#).

Pelletier acknowledges that the Bloc Québécois has never been so loudly independentist, but also, she notes, never more inclined to forget its left-wing roots. A vote for the Bloc "is to subject all the issues in this election campaign - and they are many, from the environment to democracy itself - to the sole hypothesis, still far off, of Quebec's independence." The most discouraging feature of the current debate, she says, is the tendency of many Québécois to blame Harper on "Canadians" and leave it to them to defeat his government. She calls for a vote for "the candidate most likely to defeat the Conservatives," which in Quebec excludes the Bloc.

André Frappier is a former president of the Montréal local of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), a leader of Québec solidaire, and a writer in [Canadian Dimension](#), [Presse-toi à gauche](#), and other publications.

BQ leader Gilles Duceppe, says Frappier, “puts Liberals and New Democrats on the same footing” and calls on them to settle the fate of the Harper Tories in the rest of Canada “while he will take care of Quebec’s interests.” The BQ thereby “erects a wall between the social forces in Quebec and in Canada, preventing the establishment of the relations of mutual support and understanding that we need.”

As for the NDP, it is a social-democratic party originating in the Canadian trade-union movement, with all the deformations that represents, but it is at this point the only [political] tool not belonging to sectors of big business.... The left should use it to go further and work to build a real progressive, pan-Canadian political alternative that will uphold Quebec sovereignty.

And here is an English version of my contribution to this debate focused on what I consider the main considerations. I follow it with reference to some of my past articles on the evolution of the NDP historically and in recent years. •

What Options for Ecosocialists in Canada’s Federal Election?

At stake in this election is the fate of the Harper government, the most reactionary government since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Only two opposition parties can realistically hope to replace the Conservatives: the New Democratic Party and the Liberals. Both are neoliberal, with no substantial programmatic differences.

The Liberals, with a long record of serving Canadian capitalism as the country’s traditional governing party, but sensing the public mood for “change,” are attempting to outflank the NDP on its left – proposing major public infrastructure projects and acknowledging the need for deficit budgets to confront the impending global recession.

NDP leader Thomas Mulcair is attempting to prove his party’s reliability to a ruling class still distrustful of the NDP’s historic origins in and surviving links to a section of organized labour, mainly in English Canada. He is stressing his commitment to a balanced budget from the outset, an implicit acknowledgement that an NDP government would not implement major social reforms other than (possibly) its promise of a “national” childcare program.

There are differences between the Liberals and NDP in some other areas. For example, the NDP to its credit has opposed anti-democratic legislation like Bill C-51, which the Liberals supported.

However, beholden to the needs of finance capital, neither party can be trusted to implement any real program of progressive reform, still less challenge the hydrocarbon-based economic model underlying capitalist development in recent decades.

Ecosocialist Options?

What, then, are the options for ecosocialists in Canada and Quebec?

The Harper government must be defeated. Although neither the NDP nor the Liberals offer a break with neoliberalism, there is a political rationale for calling for an NDP vote, both in Quebec and the ROC.

A Liberal government would simply replace one traditional capitalist party with another. The election of an NDP government, on the other hand, while not a paradigm shift, would disrupt the established order, politically destabilizing it at the level of government holding decisive powers in the Canadian state.

It could open space for popular movements to mobilize and open an improved perspective for exploring and possibly creating a new pan-Canadian left force.

The Bloc Québécois offers a false choice between Quebec independence and the defeat of Harper. The BQ cannot defeat Harper, and independence will be won in Quebec, not Ottawa. The success of the Quebec sovereigntist movement is a precondition to implementing a progressive anticapitalist agenda in Quebec and would pose the possibility of reconfiguring the Canadian state, either without Quebec or in a new, democratic and plurinational federation including not only Quebec but the First Nations.

The power of the Quebec independence movement has already forced the NDP to acknowledge formally Quebec's right of self-determination, through its Sherbrooke Declaration and its draft bill in the last Parliament that would recognize as legitimate a 50 per cent plus one vote for independence. That alone demarks it from the Liberals on a key fault line in the politics and structure of the Canadian capitalist state. If the NDP is elected to government, the left must hold it to that position.

Richard Fidler is an Ottawa member of the Socialist Project. This article first appeared on his blog [Life on the Left](#).

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