

A stylized world map composed of a grid of dots in various shades of gray, with several dots highlighted in red. The map is centered behind the title text.

The Canadian New Democratic Party: A New Big Player in Canadian Politics?

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- Canada's Social Democratic Party NDP was formed in 1961 as a successor party to the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation; it has a tradition of formal ties with organized labour and is a member of the Socialist International.
- The NDP achieved its best ever electoral result in 2011, capturing 31 per cent of the vote and, for the first time at the national level, forming the Official Opposition.
- Current challenges for the NDP include solidifying its position as the principal left-of-centre alternative to the Conservative government and managing its new-found strength in the province of Quebec.




The New Democratic Party of Canada (NDP) is a national political party, formed in 1961. The party's roots, however, date back to 1932 with the formation of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). The CCF was formed as a new political party during the height of the Great Depression and was devoted to the cause of economic socialism. The CCF championed issues such as public ownership of many key industries and a large segment of the Canadian economy, and significant expansion of the role of government in providing a safety net for citizens through the introduction of programs such as universal pensions and health care. The CCF was strongly ideological in its commitment to economic socialism, as evidenced in its founding pledge that »No CCF government will rest content until it has eradicated capitalism.« The CCF had strong ties to agrarian sectors in western Canada and worked to strengthen ties with emerging industrial sectors in central Canada. The party had modest electoral success at the national level. In its first election in 1935 it elected seven MPs (of 245), winning 9 per cent of the popular vote. Its best showing came in 1945 when it captured 28 parliamentary seats with 16 per cent of the vote. It had greater success at the provincial level where it formed the government in Saskatchewan and introduced the country's first universal healthcare scheme.

With the expansion of the Canadian industrial economy, and the formation of the Canadian Labour Congress, talks between the CCF and organized labour began in the late 1950s regarding the creation of a new left-of-centre political party with formal ties to the trade union movement. These resulted in the creation of the NDP in 1961, essentially as a rebranded form of the CCF. The NDP has contested every federal election since and has active wings in many provinces. The party's greatest successes have come at the provincial level where it has formed governments in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and Nova Scotia.

At the federal level, for most of its existence the New Democrats have been a minor opposition party finishing behind the Liberals and Conservatives. Only the latter two parties have ever formed a government in Canada, which has a strong tradition of single-party government, leaving no room for the NDP to join a governing coalition of the type found in many European parliaments. The party typically won between 15 and 20 per cent of the popular vote in its first few decades of electoral competition, with 1988 being a high water mark in which it

won 43 seats (of 295) in Parliament with a 20 per cent share of the vote. Two factors were often pointed to as limiting the NDP's potential for growth, one institutional and one related to the country's political culture. Institutionally, the party has been disadvantaged by the use of the single member plurality electoral system. The NDP's vote share typically has not been efficiently distributed among electoral constituencies, resulting in its regularly achieving a lower proportion of seats in the parliament than its share of the popular vote would warrant. In a fairly typical result, in the 2006 federal election, the party won 18 per cent of the vote and fewer than 10 per cent of the seats in the House of Commons. Conversely, the larger Conservative and Liberal parties often benefited from the machinations of the electoral system, with the winning party converting a vote share in the 40 per cent range into a majority of parliamentary seats.

The NDP also struggled to break into a party system that has been described as based on »brokerage« politics. For many, the defining issue in Canadian politics has been the need to broker the divergent regional and linguistic-based interests inherent in a country with the geographic scope and diversity found in Canada. Spanning six time zones and thousands of kilometres, Canadian political (as well as social and economic) interests can differ significantly in divergent regions. Added to this is the complexity of managing the federal bargain between French and English Canada. A result of this has been a tradition of electoral politics with relatively weak left-right ideological contestation of the type marking many European political systems. In its place was competition between two centre-seeking parties with only slight, and often shifting, differences in terms of public policy. Both the Conservatives and Liberals often sought to minimize any policy differences and to forge large ideological coalitions with an emphasis on fostering accommodation among the different regional and linguistic communities. Many on the ideological left characterized this as competition between similar teams of elites and believed this to be detrimental to their cause and thus encouraged the formation of the CCF and then NDP as an ideological counter to these big-tent, largely non-ideological competitors. The party's traditional electoral weakness in Quebec and eastern Canada (where it elected few members in federal elections) also made it an unlikely instrument of national accommodation and has often weakened its appeal among the many voters who view this as a principal task of the federal government.



There has always been some internal conflict within the NDP between those who believe the party must maintain its »socialist« ideological commitment and those who believe the party needs to be more ideologically pragmatic in order to achieve electoral success. From time to time the saliency of this debate has increased as different groups within the party have attempted to water-down its ideological positioning and this in turn has raised opposition from others in the party. This was evident as recently as the spring of 2011 when a national party conference considered whether the party needed to abandon its long-time commitment to »democratic socialism« in order to be perceived as moving to the ideological centre and thus positioning itself as a potential governing party. The party put off a decision on this question as its leader has tried to focus less on sweeping ideological debates and instead focusing on individual policy concerns he believes are of interest to working and middle class families.


This approach was evident in the 2011 federal election in which the NDP had by far its best ever electoral result. In this election the party won 31 per cent of the vote and 103 parliamentary seats. This allowed it to finish a strong second, behind the Conservatives, and for the first time, at the national level, to claim the title of the Official Opposition. The party won seats in all regions of the country and made a dramatic breakthrough in the province of Quebec. Having never elected more than one Quebec MP in any earlier election, the NDP won 59 of the province's 75 electoral districts in 2011.

The NDP focused its 2011 campaign largely around the popularity of their leader, Jack Layton, and a promise to do politics differently by focusing on the real policy needs of Canadians and to minimize partisanship and bickering among parties. After a series of minority governments that were largely paralyzed by a lack of consensus within parliament, and thus were often unable to accomplish much in the way of policy objectives, the NDP campaign criticized the other parties for focusing on their own interests and not those of regular Canadians. The party presented a modest policy platform that called for balanced budgeting and was void of promising new, large-scale, expensive national programs that it had often championed in the past. In doing so, Layton argued that the party had matured and was ready to compete for the Prime Ministership. Layton pointed to NDP governments in provinces such as Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia, that were often moderate in approach and had

been fiscally responsible, as evidence that the NDP was ready to govern and was not too far from the ideological centre, where most Canadians are believed to be.

Consistent with this approach the New Democrats' election promises maintained the Conservative government's promise to present a balanced budget within four years and resisted any calls for higher levels of individual taxation. To illustrate support for free enterprise, and its role in job creation, the party emphasized its plan to lower taxes for small businesses, while increasing rates for large corporations. The party focused on a number of what might be seen as social and economic justice issues in calling for an increase in government pension benefits, an increase in the guaranteed income supplement for seniors, and a national child care program. Long seen as the principal champions of universal health care, the party took a modest approach in this election, arguing for an increase in the number of health care professionals and the availability of more home care options (two policies with broad support in the electorate) and played down earlier commitments to expensive new programs, such as a national prescription drug plan. The party also emphasized its long time commitment to environmental issues with promises to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, to support a carbon cap-and-trade system and to invest in public transportation.

On the strength of positioning itself as a moderate, centre-left party, led by a popular leader who focused his party's campaign on pocket-book issues, the New Democrats accomplished their long time objective of replacing the Liberals as the principal party of the centre-left. The question is whether this is a one-off or whether the party will be able to maintain this position and challenge the Conservatives for government. The answer to this question may largely depend on how the party deals with its new found support in the province of Quebec. Politics in this province, at both the federal and provincial levels, has for decades revolved almost fully around the national question – meaning the place of this French-speaking province within the Canadian federation. In the previous six federal elections, the separatist Bloc Québécois won a majority of seats in the province with the strongly federalist Liberals winning most of the remainder. While the Quebec electorate was generally perceived as progressive and left-of-centre, there was little space for the New Democrats in a politics largely defined by the national question and dominated by the Bloc and the Liberals.



In the 2011 campaign, with support for Quebec sovereignty stalled in public opinion polls and many commentators observing a generational decline in support for sovereignty, the Bloc Québécois saw their popular support drop precipitously, creating an opportunity that the New Democrats seized. Jack Layton is fluently bilingual, having spent part of his early life in Quebec, and is personally very popular with the province's voters. Layton performed well in several important appearances on French-language television, including a party leaders' debate, and by mid-campaign the NDP's support in the province was increasing markedly. This was significantly aided by the NDP's policy position of being open to further constitutional talks aimed at addressing Quebec's concerns. The province has been outside the constitutional fold since 1982 when its legislature opposed the adoption of a new Canadian constitution. Several attempts to redress this situation, notably the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords, have failed and have largely scared off the other federalist political parties from talking about constitutional change. With the Bloc losing its appeal, sovereigntist voters, many of whom are ideologically left-of-centre, were attracted to the NDP out of support for Layton, agreement with the party's progressive policy stances and interest in its willingness to engage in constitutional negotiations.

A principal challenge for the NDP moving forward will be the managing of its new supporters in Quebec and their expectations regarding the party's representation of their province's interests at the national level. Having never before elected more than one Quebec MP, the party's parliamentary and activist base has traditionally been dominated by western Canadians, with additional support from Ontario. Many of these party stalwarts will not share the party's new Quebec supporters' enthusiasm for engaging in the national question. Internal disagreements may also arise over issues concerning national social and economic programs of the type long advocated by the party that Quebecers may object to as infringing provincial jurisdiction. Managing these potential divisions will take great skill and will be a significant test for Layton.

A second challenge for the party will be whether it is successful in positioning itself as the primary alternative to the governing Conservatives. While to some extent this will be determined by the Liberals' relative success at rebuilding themselves, it is also dependent upon Layton's ability to keep the party focused on presenting mod-

erately progressive alternatives on policy issues of concern to Canadian families and not straying into more doctrinaire territory by advancing a strongly socialist agenda. While some of this tension was evident at the party's first post-election conference, Layton has, during his time as leader, largely managed to temper this issue and continues to position the party in the centre-left. If the NDP is able to present itself as a progressive, modestly left-of-centre alternative, it may succeed in squeezing out the Liberals who will have little policy space in which to differentiate themselves. If, on the other hand, the party moves further left, the Liberals may re-emerge as the principal party of the centre-left.

In terms of resources, the New Democrats appear to be in good shape. The party has adjusted reasonably well to changes in Canada's political finance laws and has run well-funded campaigns in recent elections. Being the Official Opposition will bring additional parliamentary resources to the party and the increased publicity inherent in the position should assist it in its fundraising efforts. In this sense, the NDP has the upper hand over the Liberals who have scarce resources and a depleted parliamentary caucus. A matter of concern for the NDP may be the continued leadership of Jack Layton, who has suffered from serious health issues. Much of the party's electoral success hinged on his popularity with voters (particularly in Quebec) and it may be difficult for the party to maintain this support under a different leader.

In recent years there has been some talk relating to a potential merger between the New Democrats and the Liberals in an attempt to stop the Conservatives from winning a majority position with a minority of the popular vote. This issue had more saliency when the Liberals were the dominant centre-left party and the New Democrats were mired in third and fourth place. Given their long history as the country's dominant party, the Liberals are highly unlikely to agree to any merger in which they would be the junior partner. Similarly, given their current position of strength, the New Democrats' likelihood of engaging in any agreement that would see them as anything but the senior partner is unlikely. The result is that it is highly unlikely that any serious movement towards a merger will take place until further elections make clear which party is electorally strongest.

Addendum

The year since this report was written has been an eventful one for the NDP. Leader Jack Layton did succumb to his cancer and passed away in August 2011. The Party appointed a rookie MP from Quebec, Nicole Turmel, as interim leader and set a leadership vote for March 2012. In establishing the rules for this election, the Party decided on a one-member/one-vote format and eliminated earlier provisions that reserved one-quarter of the votes for members of affiliated trade unions. The latter decision was controversial as some viewed it as an effort to distance the party from its traditionally close relationship with organized labour.

The contest attracted seven candidates, including five from the parliamentary wing. The Party allowed anyone who joined by early February 2012 to vote in the contest. Accordingly, candidates spent the months from September to January recruiting supporters to the Party and these efforts were successful as membership doubled by the time of the vote to almost 130,000.

The four leading candidates essentially could be placed into two groups. MPs Thomas Mulcair and Nathan Cullen argued that the Party needed to do things somewhat differently in order to take the next step electorally and form a government. Mulcair argued for a »modernization« of the Party's policies and a modest shift towards the ideological centre. Cullen supported exploring electoral cooperation with the Liberals in order to avoid vote splitting on the centre-left. MP Peggy Nash and long-time party operative Brian Topp opposed these changes and essentially argued for the Party to remain true to its ideological roots and continue on its current course. This divide over tactics was the principal cleavage in the contest.

Mulcair emerged as a clear winner, leading on each ballot. His and Cullen's support far exceeded that of Topp and Nash, indicating significant support within the Party for taking the steps necessary to expand the NDP's electoral base in order to make it a credible challenger for government.

Turmel was seen as a weak interim leader and she had little national exposure. During the campaign, some Party supporters worried that the leadership vacuum of more than six months was providing an opportunity for the Liberals to regroup and surpass the New Democrats as the

leading opposition voice to the Conservative government. In the event it turns out these concerns were exaggerated as public opinion polling in the wake of Mulcair's selection shows the New Democrats well ahead of the Liberals and challenging the Conservatives for the lead.

Mulcair is an experienced Quebec-based MP. He formally served in the provincial legislature and in the cabinet of Quebec Premier Jean Charest. He is a strong performer in Parliament and is an aggressive campaigner. It is likely that we will see sharp and heated debates over public policy issues between the Conservatives and the New Democrats during future parliamentary sessions. The continued strength of the NDP may indicate a growing ideological polarization in Canadian politics between the centre-left and centre-right.



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