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Canadian State

A Leap Toward Radical Politics?

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The Leap Manifesto is, in a way, Canada's version of the burst of Left and socialist energies that have come with the Bernie Sanders campaign in the Democratic Party in the U.S. and the Jeremy Corbyn leadership win in the Labour Party in Britain. As with these, the explosion of popular interest reflects general disquiet about the limits of recent protests demanding changes from the state but having no strategy to transform it, on the one hand; and disappointments with electoral politics and social democratic parties that only seem to reinforce neoliberalism, on the other.

The Manifesto gained national prominence through a favourable resolution passed at the recent NDP Convention encouraging discussion of it within the party. But the Leap Manifesto also has an independent existence coming out of climate change struggles in Canada over the last decade, particularly with respect to pipelines development to further increase extraction of oil from the tar sands and First Nations sovereignty and ecological justice demands.

The Discussion Paper below from the Socialist Project invites debate on the specifics of the Leap Manifesto's proposals. This will unavoidably involve serious reflection on the complex politics of building a social force – and literally inventing new strategies – able to address the urgency of climate change, First Nations struggles over land and self-government, and the authoritarian neoliberalism spreading in Canada. Frustrations with what has come to be called ‘neoliberalism’ – the hyper-capitalism of stunning inequalities, ever-deeper commodification of all aspects of our lives, environmental degradation, corporate-driven trade pacts, and the narrowing of substantive democracy – have seriously discredited traditional political parties. This has often included parties on the social democratic left.

Canada's New Democratic Party (NDP) seemed immune from this for some time. But in the aftermath of their disastrous showing in the 2015 federal election, and the [dramatic developments](#) at the NDP's Edmonton convention in April, the federal NDP has been drawn into the maelstrom. Delegates at the convention did the previously unthinkable: they not only refused to give their current leader, [Tom Mulcair](#), the traditional strong vote of confidence, but for the first time in party history directly rejected the incumbent. The rejection clearly extended to a rebuke of the architects of the party's recent electoral platforms, notably expressed in the extent of support that delegates registered for the social movement-inspired Leap Manifesto, with its focus on ecology, indigenous rights, and social justice, all downplayed in the fall NDP campaign.

Reigniting Debates?

For the socialist left (which has in large part abstained from extensive participation in the NDP or participated only marginally), the rebellion within the NDP has reignited debates about working inside the NDP. In particular, it has raised the question of whether the delegitimation of the party elite and the emergence of the Leap Manifesto signal a new opportunity to join others in moving the NDP significantly to the left. Political developments in the U.S. and Britain have given added weight to this. Bernie Sanders, running as a Democrat in the U.S. primaries, and Jeremy Corbyn, winning the leadership of the British Labour Party, have succeeded well beyond initial expectations, with the socialist left as surprised as anyone else. Sanders and Corbyn have operated inside their respective parties as ‘outsiders’ challenging the party establishment and their accommodations to neoliberalism. This is bound to suggest to Canadian socialists that there may be some new potential in a strategy for rebuilding the political space for socialist politics inside the NDP.

This challenge to the socialist left involves a set of further questions. How should we assess the Leap Manifesto – is

it a leap to an anti-capitalist position or a limited though significant step away from the neoliberal faith in markets? Is entering the NDP and participating in electoral politics the inherent trap some socialists claim it is? Should we instead focus on building the movements? What distinguishes social democratic from socialist politics at this time? And how, in the light of responses to the above, should we react to the Leap initiative?

The contention here, elaborated in the sections that follow, is that the [Leap Manifesto](#) represents an important contribution to thinking about alternatives to neoliberalism and the effort to make positive social change. Whatever its limits, the Manifesto opens the door to a more radical politics, and to what can no longer be avoided: the question of capitalism itself. If, however, its implications are reduced primarily to channel the energy of the Left into the NDP, it may well end up as another squandered opportunity to further the egalitarian, environmental, and democratic goals of the Left, and to advance the organizational means of developing the individual, collective, and institutional capacities to transcend capitalism.

The Leap Manifesto

The Leap Manifesto's presentation to the NDP convention elicited not only a sharply negative response from some new as well as old elites within the NDP, but an astonishingly overwrought backlash from much of the mainstream media. Far from expiring with the usual news cycle, these are attacks still being ramped up. Thus a full month after the convention, the Globe and Mail's veteran political commentator, [Jeffrey Simpson, launched a full frontal attack](#) on the 'Leapistas', as a "grouping of people with absolutely no idea of how to run a modern economy, deeply skeptical of most elements of the globalized world, hostile to free market economics, except of the organic-market variety on Saturday mornings, quite anti-American, committed to saving the environment at the expense of crucifying the economy." Earlier "dreamers and wreckers" inside the NDP like "the Wafflers of bygone years" had been "stifled" by "every leader of the NDP, starting with David Lewis a long time ago," but now that the party is weak, "they flourish."

The Leap Manifesto had not faced anything like such hostile reactions when it was first released during the 2015 federal election campaign. The sudden hysteria seems all the more strange given that its prime defender at the NDP convention was the Canadian political icon and media darling Stephen Lewis, who had himself played the leading role in 'stifling' the Waffle in the Ontario NDP. Indeed, this well may be a mark of how far the party has moved to embrace neoliberalism, and the concern of the mainstream political class to keep it there. One of the Manifesto's key architects is Avi Lewis (Stephen's son and David's grandson). He has explained that the modesty of its proposals reflects both its origins in a consensus among the diverse range of activists invited to a political gathering in the spring of 2015, and its hopes of building an even broader national consensus "to bring us together." In any case, the NDP convention did not actually adopt the Manifesto; it only passed a compromise resolution encouraging NDP members and constituency associations to participate in community discussions about its contents. This was in line with Leap's self-expressed goal of provoking a 'non-partisan' discussion across the country not confined to activists and any particular party.

In fact, the Leap Manifesto's contents are 'hardly radical', as was [pointed out by The Star's Tom Walkom](#), one of few media commentators who has kept his head about it. In both tone and content, the Leap Manifesto's proposals are strikingly moderate compared to earlier attempts at changing the NDP, especially that of the Waffle Movement of the late 60s and early 70s, with its call for an 'independent socialist Canada', and even the ambitions of the [New Politics Initiative](#) of the early 2000s as it emerged out of the anti-globalization initiative. In directing itself particularly to the environment crisis, it holds back from advocating the over-all economic planning that would be required and what that would entail not only in terms of fundamentally challenging corporate property rights but also in terms of democratic and participatory planning structures. Nor does it tackle the radical steps that would have to be taken to overturn the incredibly unequal distribution of income and wealth that Canada, like the rest of the capitalist world, has

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experienced in the last several decades of neoliberalism. There is next to no acknowledgement of the economic and social reorientation that would necessarily be entailed, given Canada's continental and global economic integration via 'free trade', as well as Canada's contribution to the energy and resource needs of the American empire.

The language of the Manifesto, reaching in vain for entry points into mainstream political debate, falls far short of the references to 'class', 'socialism' and 'political revolution' that [pepper the speeches of Bernie Sanders](#) in his Democratic primary campaign. That Sanders has incurred little criticism in the Canadian media, while the NDP is slammed for even being open to discussing the Leap Manifesto, is especially remarkable. What may be worrying the many enemies of the 'Leapistas' is precisely how many primary victories – based on the hard work of tens of thousands of active supporters as well as funds from a few million small donors – which Sanders has chalked up against the likes of a Hillary Clinton. While Sanders has had a surprisingly easy ride in the U.S. media overall, Keynesian liberals like [Paul Krugman in the New York Times](#) have been sharply critical of him for being too hard on Hillary while "waving away [the] limits" of political change in an "utterly unrealistic" manner.

Those attacking the 'Leapistas' here may be taking their cue more from the unrelentingly hostile British media treatment of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, despite that (or perhaps because?) he attracted some 300,000 new members to the party – unheard of in well over a half a century among any of the NDP's sister social democratic parties. This media hysteria has reached such a height that the political correspondent of the Financial Times of London recently went so far as to contend that Corbyn "should not have been in a position to become Labour leader because he should not have been a Labour MP" (as he has been for over three decades) because a parliamentary party should have no room for those who "reject capitalism or war in principle." The Labour Party's ability to 'hang on', as Corbyn put it, in the recent local and regional elections in the UK in the face of such vitriol is itself very significant.

Could the overwrought hostility to the 'Leapistas' be indicative of a concern to stop the socialist contagion at the Canadian border? Here we come to the main political point: the Leap Manifesto has actually come to embody the spirit of radicalism in Canada today. This isn't so much about its progressive policies, such as the rejection of neoliberalism and austerity, the call for a moratorium on the expansion of pipelines, retrofitting of housing, expansion of public transit and public infrastructure, or the sensitivity to the impact of environmental policies on workers as part of ecologically-responsible production. Nor is it just a matter of extending ecology issues to social justice and other issues – 'connecting the dots' as Manifesto advocates have put it. As important as all this is, what seems most significant has been the Manifesto's identification with opposition to politics as usual, the anti-democratic subservience to economic elites, and the disappointments – and indeed betrayals – from the party and parliamentary institutions that claim to represent us.

What this spirit of radicalism represents is precisely the recognition that the rhetorical emperors of 'realism' in the face of global neoliberalism have no clothes. It is not 'realistic' governments that 'run the modern economy'; it is the capitalist economy that runs them – not in the sense of corporations or bankers directly telling them what to do but rather in the sense of coping with the volatility and even chaos of economic events (it is no accident that the favourite self-description of the U.S. Treasury for the past 25 years has been that of 'firefighters'). This spirit of radicalism is for very good reason 'deeply skeptical of most elements of the globalized world' and 'hostile to free market economics', and if it also seems 'quite anti-American', this is because of the massively unequal negative effects and multiple crises that a competitive globalized capitalism has wrought under the aegis of the U.S. empire. This spirit of radicalism is indeed oriented to looking kindly on organic markets – and not only on Saturday mornings – because of its real commitment to saving the environment, and its readiness in this context to look at all kinds of progressive alternatives. This spirit of radicalism recognizes that if the capitalism's multiple crises today are not addressed in collectivist, cooperative, democratic, and internationalist ways, then the ultra-nationalist, racist, sexist and homophobic spirit of the new far right will take the lead in expressing the frustrations with what liberal democratic politics has become, offering little more than competing teams of elites offering variations of neoliberal austerity.

This is what makes this conjuncture so pregnant with possibilities. Formerly apolitical and even anti-political activists seem, on the basis of the experience of organizing through loose networks, to have learned that there are limits to a politics of protest that does not build cumulative political and organizational capacities. There is an increasing sense that we are entering a new phase of political struggle, which has given old and new activists a fresh perspective on the possibility of engaging in electoral politics, entering the state, and breaking with both neoliberal austerity and minimal efforts to address climate change.

Electoral Politics versus the Movements?

For many activists and even some socialists, the notion of engaging with electoral politics has long been anathema, an old diversion. They remain adamant that building the movements, apart from political alignments, remains the key to social change. The siren call of the NDP and electoral politics is a curse to be avoided at all costs. From past history, there is, of course, more than a little validity to this. But it may well include its own traps and delusions, not least about changing the world without taking power.

To begin with, this perspective shields the movements (other than the unions, which it doesn't hesitate to criticize) from serious appraisal of their politics and strategies, and exaggerates their current strengths. The hard truth, however, is that mass social movements in Canada (other than some First Nations movements intersecting with specific sovereignty struggles) are at an ebb that has few precedents. This isn't to deny the energy and commitment of movement activists, and their often remarkable achievements in spite of limited resources. Rather, it is to soberly acknowledge the limits of existing movements in terms of laying the conditions for a substantive reversal of neoliberalism, challenging capitalism, or in significantly recruiting and developing a generation of activists who might do so in the future.

Choosing between electoral politics and movements is, moreover, a false choice. On the one hand, sectional movements cannot win on their own against the combined power of capital and the state. If protests inevitably come up against the limits of 'throwing stones' at the state; if the state needs to be entered to effect change and block reaction; and if insurrection is discounted as a way of coming to power; then parliamentary processes and the struggle over remaking state institutions cannot be avoided. On the other hand, this historical moment seems characterized by polarized and limited options, given the terrain of electoral politics and the increasingly authoritarian neoliberal practices of the state, as the middle ground is brushed aside by the aggressiveness of all sections of capital. It is clearer than ever that electoral politics cannot deliver on any substantive promises unless backed by the deepest mass movements, not least that of a renewed and revitalized labour movement. Parliamentary and extra-parliamentary political mobilizations, elections and movements, are not in opposition but inextricably intertwined in the struggle over power, structural reforms and revolutionary ruptures.

Part of the confusion here is rooted in the NDP's utter reduction of politics and political organization to a total focus on elections. The opposition to such 'electoralism' is then mistakenly equated to an opposition to elections per se. The point is that elections remain critical moments of political mobilization, of tests of organizational capacity, and of ideological contestation. But they are still far from, in capitalist democracies, the sum total of all politics. In this regard in Canada, the issue isn't electoral politics but the content and kind of politics that the NDP represents. The challenge is to contemplate and put in motion organizational forms, political alliances, and political parties of 'a new kind': organizations and parties that are committed to radical change, structured around the idea that developing strong and autonomous social and labour movements at the base, are a condition for making parliamentary politics relevant and a crucial dimension of the ability to carry through transformative social change.

The NDP and the Project of Transcending Capitalism

The distinction between social democratic parties like the NDP that organize to win elections and pursue policies of modest redistribution of incomes and opportunities within capitalism, and parties committed to transcending capitalism and realizing an alternative society no longer governed by the logics of profit and endless accumulation, does not lie primarily on the terrain of the policies articulated. It lies in the vision each ascribes to the organizational capacities being formed, and the willingness to engage in political mobilizations inside, against and outside the state. In capitalist societies, all reforms involve compromises on policies in trying to make social change. The crucial differences lie in compromises that accept the 'reality' of the existing political terrain as given, and compromises that are part of a determined longer-term goal to develop the popular capacities to move beyond that particular 'reality'.

The truncated vision of social democracy – with its rejection of a world beyond capitalism – leads directly to the truncated politics of diminishing expectations and limited mobilizations. This fits so well with parties organized exclusively around electoralism. What is needed, even in relation to a more immediate objective of breaking from neoliberalism, is a larger political project oriented to developing the popular understandings, organizational capacities, and institutional supports for coming to power with the will and ability to transcend capitalism. This cannot emerge at the level of individual choices and attitudes. It can only come out of building socialist organizations that see this as a collective task, rooted concretely in local communities, and willing to engage in the struggle over state power.

Social democrats claim, in dissenting from more radical interventions, that they are being 'practical', and that anyone who challenges them from more socialist perspectives within their parties are being 'unrealistic', if not 'dreamers and wreckers'. The problem, however, is that with modern capitalism having increasingly closed the 'middle ground' of social compromise, being practical has come to mean accommodating to neoliberal globalization (with its material linkages to fossil fuels and ecological dumping). This is repeatedly demonstrated when social democrats have come to office: they soon become complicit in the lowering of popular expectations, disorganizing social movements, and pursuing a 'kinder neoliberalism'. The outcome, ironically, is to act in a way that is the essence of being impractical by often campaigning on worthy goals without building the capacities to get there.

In this light, Sanders has made a remarkable run with his call for a 'political revolution', but this cannot in fact be achieved within the Democratic Party. The question American activists will soon have to address is what other kind of party can build on the expectations raised and potentials revealed by the Sanders campaign. For his part, Corbyn has also showed the staying power and renewed attraction of the Bennite socialists who were long thought to be vanquished within the Labour Party, but most of the parliamentary wing and much of the party's organizational apparatus see him as an interloper, to be tolerated only until he can be gotten rid of. So, here too, the question of breaking with social democracy will surely surface. It is hard enough to contemplate transcending capitalism within a party actually committed to an alternative vision; it is impossible to imagine doing so within a party not united around that goal.

The Socialist Left and the Leap Manifesto

What then might socialists conclude about the Leap Manifesto, the NDP, and the project of transcending capitalism?

First, the Leap Manifesto represents a significant opening for the Left in Canada, as the discussions it has already

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engendered, and will further engender, clearly show. The anti-neoliberal thrust of its proposals deserve to be endorsed and supported. And in the spirit of the Manifesto's call for genuinely discussing and debating the present opportunities and dangers, this will leave plenty of space for also addressing the limits of the manifesto, including the implicit expectation that even its modest goals can be implemented without profound transformations in state organization and social structure.

Second, the caution exhibited by spokespeople for the Leap Manifesto in engaging with the NDP so as not to become fully absorbed will be important to maintain. It is vital that the Leap Manifesto initiative retain its independence, especially during the coming leadership contest. If the NDP chooses a leader supportive of the Manifesto, this will likely lead – as developments elsewhere suggest – to an energetic burst of new entrants into the NDP. Those of us sceptical of the possibility of transforming the NDP (and aware of the utterly dismal record of ‘entryism’) cannot help but have mixed feelings about this. But this kind of politicization – which we could not in any case stop – should be welcomed even if it initially fosters illusions about the NDP. It makes no sense attacking those joining the NDP in search of a new politics. The policies forwarded by the Manifesto, particularly around ecology, will provide space for those outside the party to engage with them, while offering a constructive critique of the NDP's limits.

Third, there is the question of what constructive engagement with the Leap Manifesto might mean for the wider range of radical activists across Canada. Addressing this is essential to revive the significant militant political resistance to neoliberalism that took place over almost three decades – from the broad popular movement against free trade, to the labour movements' Days of Action, to the mobilizations against the FTAA in Quebec City, and to the G20 confrontation in Toronto. Any space that now opens up for such activist militancy needs to be seized. This means organizing forums and deploying the array of publications of the Left in Canada to further debates so differing views can be aired. It above all means joining in particular campaigns, whether against privatization, barriers to union organizing and new global free trade and investment pacts, or for collective and decommodified services, such as free transit, a living wage, and the kinds of environmental alternatives advanced in the Leap Manifesto.

Finally, it is well beyond time to once again take up the question of what will be required in an explicitly socialist project of transcending capitalism in Canada, given the long retreat from this on the part of labour and social movements as well as the NDP. Re-establishing a socialist alternative in Canadian politics, and linking up with what is happening in this respect internationally, will have to involve building new institutions to regenerate and defend socialist ideas and strategy. This is not because new socialist parties will finally become the genuine storehouses of the ‘truth’. Rather, they will need to be seen as strategic spaces in which we can collectively come up with better socialist ideas and alternatives, and through experience and experimentation improve them further. It above all means ‘making socialists’ in the sense of developing activists committed to the necessarily long-term struggle of ending capitalism and to fostering the broadest popular analytical and organizational capacities to achieve this.

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[The Bullet](#)