

## **“THE ELECTION THAT CHANGED CANADA”**

**Thursday, May 5, 2011**

The 2011 election produced a dramatically new Canadian political landscape, with major implications for years to come. For many it was a bittersweet moment. The amazing breakthrough of the New Democratic Party, taking official opposition with eight seats in Toronto and nearly all of Quebec, will go down in history as a true game-changer. The poise and stamina of NDP leader Jack Layton, combined with his ability to reach the people of Quebec in unprecedented numbers, was truly inspiring. The NDP gained a breathtaking two million votes.

Toronto will send six more NDP MP's to Ottawa, including union veterans Peggy Nash, Mike Sullivan and Matt Kellway; Andrew Cash took Davenport while Dan Harris gained a significant victory in Scarborough Southwest. Rathika Sitsabaiesan from Scarborough Rouge River is the first Tamil Canadian elected to Parliament. They will join Layton and Olivia Chow as strong, proud voices for our city.

But while we celebrate those victories, the fact is that Stephen Harper finally has his majority. In the next four years he intends to pursue an aggressive right wing agenda - more privatization and tax cuts, cuts to public services, more bad trade deals, and further continental integration. Climate change will be ignored in favour of massive expansion of the tar sands and gas production. Restrictions on foreign investment will loosen, while military and prison spending will rise dramatically.

The Liberal Party, on the other hand, is faced with a massive challenge. The carnage left after Monday night was almost unimaginable. In Parliament, it represents only a handful of seats west of the Maritimes. Its GTA fortress has been reduced to rubble – only one MP left in the entire 905 region, and fourteen seats lost in Toronto. This wasn't the result of vote-splitting – nearly a million Liberal voters abandoned the party, on top of the 800,000 lost in the last election. The Tory attack ads worked in part because Canadians resented the idea that Liberal backroom operatives thought they could go to Harvard to recruit a Prime Minister for Canada.

Ironically, there was no Conservative vote surge – they increased by just 2% - but it was Republican style niche targeting of specific constituencies that produced 24 new seats and a majority status. New Democrats gained massively from the decimation of the Bloc Quebecois, as half a million votes switched in Quebec. They also benefited from the reduced Green Party support, whose numbers dropped by 360,000 even while electing their leader Elizabeth May.

Only time will tell if the NDP can secure its place in Quebec, and whether the factious Liberal in-fighting will result in a split or a rebuilding. The real elites in this country, the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, will certainly feel emboldened by a majority government dedicated to a profoundly corporate agenda. There is no question that building a resistance to that agenda must be the priority for labour and community activists.

In Toronto, there is the urgent need to build a strong political base under each of the NDP MP's, so they can withstand the attacks that are certain to be directed at them. Finding the balance between supporting good politicians and maintaining pressure for progressive policies has always been one of the most difficult but essential tasks of the labour movement. That can dovetail with the efforts to build grassroots networks of activists working on municipal issues, as well as the preparation for the fall provincial election.

Stephen Harper, like Rob Ford, will claim that this election has given him a carte blanche mandate for the next four years. But we say that democracy is something practiced every day, and commit to work for social justice through building popular movements across the country and in our communities. Today, with the NDP taking its place as official opposition for the first time in Canadian history, we should rise to the challenge as never before.

The Executive Board recommends that Labour Council:

- 1) Congratulate Jack Layton and all of the newly elected NDP Toronto Members of Parliament, and work to strengthen the progressive political base in each of their ridings.
- 2) Work with affiliates, civil society and community organizations to continue key struggles such as pensions, EI, trade, good jobs, human rights, peace and the environment.
- 3) Begin preparation for the fall provincial election immediately.
- 4) Continue to demand change to the electoral system so that it accurately reflects the will of the people.\*

\*Canada's first-past-the-post electoral system continues to seriously distort outcomes. In Saskatchewan, the Conservatives took 13 out of 14 seats with only 56% of the vote. The NDP with 32% got none.