

CONTRIBUTORS **OPINION**

Can the NDP be progressive again?

It's a good time to reflect on where the NDP came from and is headed, Toba Bryant and Dennis Raphael write.

By **Toba Bryant**

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The ascent of Marit Stiles to the leadership of the Ontario NDP provides an opportunity to reflect upon where the NDP has come from and where it is going.

Since the mid-19th century, socialist parties in some form or other have existed in many nations. These have ranged from revolutionary anti-capitalist communist parties to reformist social democratic parties. While social democratic parties were initially organized to seek improvements in living and working conditions through parliamentary democracy with the ultimate goal of a post-capitalist socialist society, most gave up this hope in favour of managed reforms within a capitalist economy. More recently, these parties have embraced neo-liberal approaches to governance which allow corporate and business interests to call the public policy shots. There is now little distance between them and traditional pro-capitalist political parties. Not surprisingly, there is said to be a “crisis” among social democratic parties.

Canada's main “left” party, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, followed a similar course. Initially a socialist party dedicated to “the eradication of capitalism,” it was first transformed into a reformist capitalist party — the New Democratic Party (NDP) — which then morphed into a neoliberal-confirming party such that any concern with mobilizing working-class Canadians to confront Canada's capitalist economic system is for the most part absent. The result is there is no political party in Canada that explicitly identifies how so many of our current problems — income inequality and poverty, food insecurity and hunger, precarious work and unemployment, and housing insecurity and homelessness, among others — result from our economic system unfairly distributing economic and social resources among Canadians and preventing our political system from providing many Canadians with the economic and social security gained through programs and services.

There have been attempts over the years to reconnect the NDP with CCF values and principles and with the many social movements in Canada calling for social justice. In every case, however, when these attempts arise within the NDP — the Waffle in the 1960s, the New Politics Initiative in the early 2000s, and the Leap in the early 2010s — they have been suppressed by the party establishment. Just within the last few months, the B.C. NDP disallowed a progressive candidate to compete for its leadership under questionable circumstances. This pattern of suppression has been so consistent we consider the NDP to have become an institutional “Whac-A-Mole” by which any attempt to move it toward truly progressive stances is bopped as soon as it appears.

Some call for NDP members to regain control of the party from “orange liberals” and restore its transformative vision. Others question the value of even working within the NDP and whether efforts for transforming Canadian society are better directed elsewhere. Ideally, the NDP would return to its roots and articulate a strong critique of our economic system. This might be electorally advantageous as Canadians increasingly recognize that our economic system is the root of many of our problems. Indeed,

a 2019 Forum poll found 58 per cent of Canadians held positive views toward socialism with only 40 per cent holding negative opinions.

Failing that, we propose that institution of a proportional representation process in our electoral system would allow the emergence of a new “left” party that would articulate a critique of our economic system and means of either profoundly reforming or moving beyond it. This new party would not dilute support for the left in Canada, but would likely enhance it as any loss of support from the NDP to this new party would be translated into seats in legislatures. It might even serve to reawaken the NDP to its origins. At the very minimum, it would provide an avenue for articulation of a new vision of Canadian society to which, we believe, many Canadians would be drawn.

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