

Holding Pattern

The 2019 Canadian Election

By Andrea Levy

In the parlance of the horse-race terminology favoured by election commentators, the 2019 Canadian Elections were a squeaker, or too close to call up until the last minute. Yet given the living fossil of Anglo-American representative democracy that is Canada's winner-take-all electoral system, the outcome of the 2019 election held few real surprises. There was little doubt that it would be either the incumbent Liberal Party or the opposition Conservative Party which would walk away from election night victorious, if chastened, perhaps, by minority status. The French have a word for it: *alternance*, two parties governing by turns in a protracted holding pattern. And the periodic alternation of the Liberals and the Conservatives, both parties of capital whose concrete policies have diverged chiefly in the details, has characterized Canadian politics virtually since Confederation.

The perpetuation of this holding pattern can only exacerbate the country's many afflictions and contradictions: from spiralling inequality of income and wealth to an economy embedded in extractivism; from the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples to the catastrophe of climate change, with recent research revealing that Canada is warming twice as fast as the rest of the world.

With a turnout just shy of 65 percent, the 21st century pattern of voter disaffection held steady. When a third of the electorate stays home, even a majority government cannot claim a strong popular mandate. In this election, Justin Trudeau's Liberal Party was re-elected with thirteen seats short of a majority, and roughly a third of the ballots cast by those who were motivated enough to go to the polls (a share of the popular vote that was actually a notch lower than that of the rival Conservatives). Although a minority government is generally viewed as undesirable among defenders of the Westminster parliamentary system, regarded as potentially weak and unstable, the most progressive federal governments in contemporary Canadian history have been Liberal minorities whose capacity to govern hinged on the cooperation of the social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP). This occurred twice consecutively in the 1960s, giving rise to two pillars of the welfare state: universal healthcare and a national pension plan. It happened again in 1972, under Justin's father Pierre Trudeau, yielding such gains as a national program for low-cost non-market housing. And although those relative high points of liberal democracy in Canada date back to before the hegemony of neo-liberal capitalism and the country's continued devolution as an aspiring petro-state, and prior to the Third Way turn of social democratic parties, many progressive voters in Canada have been harkening back hopefully to that history.

While the election night pundits pointed to a disgruntled electorate, a regionally fractured polity and a government hamstrung in its policymaking power, voters on the left of the political centre generally see the advent of a Liberal minority with the NDP poised to wrest concessions in exchange for its cooperation as the best possible scenario under the circumstances. They see it as an opportunity to push the political centre a little to the left.

Yet the NDP emerged from this election on much shakier ground than it began, notched down to fourth place principally as a result of the resurgence of the regional Bloc Québécois party, which won 32 of Québec's 78 seats in the federal parliament. The 2019 election brought an unceremonious end to Québec's honeymoon with the NDP, as the party lost all but one of its 16 seats in *la belle province*, a knockout blow which will inhibit its ability to re-establish a foothold there. Moreover, while the NDP is widely viewed as the natural ally of the Liberals, Trudeau ruled out a formal or informal governing coalition from the outset, announcing his intention to work with all parties on an ad-hoc basis to pass legislation. This suggests that the balance of power in Canada's 43rd Parliament will be a moving target.

Gimme Shelter

The mainstream media never tire of reporting that, measured solely by the misconceived indicator of GDP growth, that Canada has prospered economically under Justin Trudeau. Official unemployment rates stand at their lowest since the mid-1970s. But polls and studies show that a majority of Canadians feel financially insecure. They are worried about the rising cost of living and their incomes failing to keep pace. "Affordability" loomed large amongst voter concerns in this election. Decades of neoliberal austerity imposed by successive federal and provincial governments have whittled down the public services that often make a critical difference in the quality of life for many citizens. For lower income earners, affordable housing has grown increasingly out of reach. The cost of rental housing has spiralled in recent years, rising from ten to fifteen per cent in 2018 alone in many cities across the country. Vancouver and Toronto now rank among the most expensive housing markets in the world. A study by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives revealed that someone working full-time for minimum wage or slightly better than minimum wage cannot afford to rent a one or two-bedroom apartment in the vast majority of neighbourhoods in the country. The acute lack of access to housing hobbles the lives of about a quarter of Canadian workers as well as many new immigrants and refugees. And housing conditions for Indigenous people both on reserve and in cities are deplorable, as underscored by a 2019 UN Report. In August, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities called on all the federal parties to commit to investing billions in the national housing strategy to secure the needs of seniors, Indigenous people, and low-income renters.

But this vital question was scarcely addressed during the campaign by the leading parties. The Liberals and Conservatives instead dwelled on promises of greater access to home ownership. The NDP and the Green Party did however put forward proposals for expanding essential non-market housing, a responsibility abandoned by successive federal governments to the point that non-market housing accounts for a paltry four per cent of Canada's national housing stock.

As for healthcare, ranked in the polls as the cardinal issue for voters, the talk – among the parties not actually hostile to socialized medicine – centred on making prescription medication more affordable by introducing some form of Pharmacare (Canadians pay more for prescription medication compared to other high-income countries with single-payer systems). The Liberals have talked about Pharmacare for twenty years without actually implementing a plan (doubtlessly responsive to relentless lobbying by the pharmaceutical and insurance industries). Both the NDP and the Green Party support a universal single-payer plan, and the NDP's Jagmeet Singh made it a centrepiece of his campaign, along with free dental care for households with an annual income of less than \$70,000.

Liberals and Conservatives

Trudeau's Liberal Party basically ran on a platform of green-tinted capitalism with a human face. It touted its proficiency as an economic manager, its speciously humble commitment to do better on a range of issues if entrusted with another mandate, and its aura of inclusiveness and compassion, seen in positive contrast with the nearly decade-long mean-spirited Conservative administration of Stephen Harper. Above all, it ran as the lesser of two evils, pointing to the perils of a Conservative victory for the majority of Canadians and particularly the prospect of billions in cuts to public services and delayed infrastructure investments held out by Andrew Scheer as the price of a balanced budget.

However, the illusion of Trudeau Liberals as one of the few redeeming remnants of enlightened government amidst the global reactionary drift took a beating. Over the last four years, as the party predictably betrayed many of the promises that helped bring it to power in 2015, beginning with its pledge to reform the first-past-the-post voting system, which remains a roadblock to even minor improvements of Canada's liberal parliamentary system. It did not come as a surprise to the left in Canada or Québec that a Liberal government would talk a progressive game during an election campaign and then shed its skin once in office.

But the scale of hypocrisy and betrayal was particularly flagrant, as captured by Canadian cartoonist Michael De Adder's cartoon of a grinning Stephen Harper stripping off a mask of Justin Trudeau's face. One especially egregious case in point was the Liberals' promise to make good on reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. To cite just one example, Trudeau had pledged to put an end to the ongoing scandalous lack of access to clean drinking water on First Nation reserves, a federal responsibility neglected for decades by successive governments. While some progress has been made, the government is a long way from fulfilling its commitment, which was limited to lifting only long-term boil water advisories (some lasting decades) by 2021, and contaminated water remains the norm for scores of communities – this in a country with one of the world's largest renewable supplies of freshwater. In a scathing piece published during the campaign in *Maclean's* magazine, Mi'kmaq lawyer Pam Palmater underlined that while Trudeau had recast the rhetoric surrounding the government's relationship with First Nations, admittedly an advance over the Harper years, the reality remained largely unchanged. "In effect," she wrote, "when First Nations vote, they appoint their minister of Indian Affairs – the next person who will breach their Aboriginal, treaty and land rights, as well as deny them their basic human rights." The Liberal failure to follow through on reconciliation was driven home during the election campaign itself. It was reported that the Liberals were appealing a ruling of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal directing the federal government to grant what could amount to billions in compensation to Indigenous children and their families who suffered harm at the hands of the child welfare system on First Nations' reserves.

Despite their hypocrisy and beholdenness to corporate interests, the Liberals are perceived with some justice as a kinder, gentler party, at least in spirit, than the Conservatives. This election brought into focus as never before that party's right-wing populist, socially reactionary cast, with leader Andrew Scheer pledging to protect and serve the oil and gas industry while balancing the budget on the backs of the majority of Canadians. This despite polls indicating clearly that the majority of citizens approve of the government running deficits to fund job creation and social programs. Scheer ran an ugly and mendacious fear-mongering campaign revolving around the timeworn tactic of demonizing taxes – a prelude to the inevitable crippling cuts to be inflicted on Canada's weakened welfare state. With no serious challenge on their right flank, they catered to their loyal base, concentrated in western Canada

and parts of Ontario, offering a main course of unmitigated austerity with a side order of social conservatism that curtails women's rights, penalizes the poor, and stigmatizes racialized and sexual minorities. Fears of renewed attempts to recriminalize abortion, for example, were fuelled by revelations that one quarter of the Conservative Party candidates in this election were endorsed by the country's largest so-called pro-life group. Scheer, who personally opposes abortion, claimed he would not challenge its current status as a government-funded medical procedure with no legal restrictions, but refused to say if he would enjoin Conservative MPs from introducing private members' bills designed to limit a woman's right to choose to terminate a pregnancy. In this, as in much else, there is little to distinguish the party under Scheer's leadership from the Conservative party of the Harper years.

The NDP

Early predictions of the decimation of Canada's historic third party proved premature. The NDP evidently learned a lesson from the punishment it took at the polls in the 2015 election when it looked to be the incarnation of uninspired third-way social democracy. Then it ran on a vow to balance the budget, a move that put a shine on Justin Trudeau's progressive veneer, as the Liberal leader accused the NDP's Tom Mulcair of choosing austerity and cuts over jobs and growth. Mulcair was widely seen to have snatched defeat from the jaws of victory in the party's first real fighting chance to take the reins of government.

Coming up to the 2019 election the party appeared disorganized and Jagmeet Singh seemed a lacklustre candidate tending to trade in platitudes. But as the official campaign got underway, Singh came into his own, deftly defending some key NDP proposals such as Pharmacare. Where the Liberals and the Conservatives both predictably offered to lighten the tax burden a little for most Canadians, the NDP proposed to tackle the massive tax avoidance that robs the state of revenue, with the closing of tax loopholes, a crackdown on offshore tax havens and a one per cent tax on Canadians with a net worth of more than \$20 million (a recent study revealed that Canada ranks fifth, just behind Germany, among countries with the greatest number of "ultra high net worth individuals" worth at least \$30 million US.) As he championed healthcare and tax fairness, Singh's own popularity soared, especially after a televised leadership debate midway through the campaign.

Nevertheless, while the party's performance defied the worst fears, its showing was unimpressive. It was reduced from 39 seats to 24 and received just under 16 per cent of the popular vote, a few percentage points less than in 2015. Most crucially, it suffered an epic setback in Québec, losing almost all its seats to the Bloc Québécois, a party committed to the long-term goal of Québec independence that runs candidates only in that province with the aim of defending its vision of Québec's particular interests in the federal parliament.

The Left's Two Solitudes: English Canada and Québec

Despite its entrenched bureaucratic structures and its tenuous stature as an adversary of the status quo, the NDP remains the default option for virtually the entire spectrum of the left in English Canada. Among those on the socialist left, opinion is somewhat divided between those who, in spite of decades of disappointed efforts to move the party leftward, still cling to the hope of reviving its socialist roots, and those who would prefer to see a new more radical political formation embedded in social movements and intervening both in the parliamentary arena and beyond. Among the latter,

however, there is a widely shared sense that the necessary conditions – in the form of a combative labour movement and strong well-organized social movements – do not exist for the establishment of an avowedly anti-capitalist party with any chance of winning meaningful popular support, and therefore the NDP remains the only viable vehicle for the expression and defence of working class interests.

But there is also in some quarters genuine enthusiasm for the NDP's left turn from the right lane in which it spent the last decade. Excitement has been building too around the leadership of Jagmeet Singh, who, far from demonstrating the makings of a Canadian Corbyn, impressed many people as an ardent defender of the interests of working people and as a candidate prepared to confront the reality of both casual and systemic racism, beginning with his own experiences as a person of colour, a member of a religious minority, and the first racialized leader of a major Canadian political party (there is an ongoing discussion of the extent to which racism hampered Singh's ability to win over voters). For young left activists who have made Indigenous rights, decolonization, and anti-racism the core of their politics, the NDP's commitment to combat racism and its platform on Indigenous reconciliation constitutes a pole of attraction.

Throughout the NDP's history there have been organized efforts to nudge it leftward; the most recent of these is the Courage Coalition, a group of young activists working inside and outside the NDP which combines engagement with electoral politics and extraparliamentary organizing with the aim of building support for a Green New Deal of the North based on decolonization, Indigenous rights and a democratic redistribution of wealth and resources, in parallel with a transition away from a fossil fuel economy. It remains to be seen whether the current conjuncture allows the group to make more headway than its predecessors, but if the past proves a reliable predictor, the Courage Coalition's radical platform, which includes a call to decommodify transportation and housing in favour of expanding the commons through public and cooperative ownership, will remain of marginal interest within the party.

In Québec, where the NDP has never succeeded in planting roots, perspectives on the party are very different. The francophone left, which grew out of the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s, has always been committed to the quest for Québec independence, and the federal government is viewed as the agent of Québec's subjugation. An implacable obstacle to the province's national aspirations, regardless of the party in power or vying for it. Federal election campaigns were largely a matter of indifference. The NDP wandered in the political wilderness in Québec for half a century, perceived with reason as antipathetic to the sovereignist movement, until 2011, when a unique set of circumstances led to a remarkable breakthrough for the party there. Until that time, when the left in Québec both-ered at all with federal politics, it mainly supported the Bloc Québécois. But in the 2019 election, that option was foreclosed for some of Québec's progressive voters by the Bloc's recent identitarian turn.

Founded in the early 1990s, the Bloc was, for most of its history, distinctly on the social democratic side of the political spectrum. It often voted with the NDP on a variety of social and economic issues in the House of Commons. It was kicked to the curb by Quebec voters in 2011 in favour of the NDP, in part because it was seen as having failed to fulfill its mission of pressing the case for Quebec sovereignty and thus having lost its *raison d'être*. After an eight-year near-death experience, the Bloc endeavoured – successfully as the 2019 election proved – to resuscitate itself under the leadership of Yves-François Blanchet. The strategy involved riding a wave of ethnic nationalism that has been gaining momentum, particularly in rural Québec, for the last few years, even as, somewhat paradox-

ically, enthusiasm for exiting the Canadian federation has ebbed. Hitching its star to the popular centre-right provincial government of Francois Legault, the Bloc campaigned controversially by urging Québec voters to “choose men and women who resemble you and share your values.”

For a fair number of Québec’s more radical left thinkers and activists, this type of pandering to prejudice and exclusion ruled the Bloc out as worthy of support. Moreover, while the party campaigned as the environmentally friendly choice, Blanchet’s own political past as a provincial environment minister who defended opening up the ecologically fragile island of Anticosti to oil and gas exploration, among other environmentally destructive projects, taxed the credibility of the party’s pretensions. On some issues, though, the Bloc still bends the nationalist arc in a relatively progressive direction. The introduction to its platform strikes a left populist-cum-nationalist chord: “the Bloc is not beholden to the big oil companies of the West, to the banks of Bay Street, or to the anti-abortion lobbies. The Bloc Québécois answers only to the people of Québec.”

One consequence of the Bloc’s politically ambiguous realignment was the fragmentation of opinion on the broad progressive movement in Québec with respect to federal politics. Those for whom the assertion of Québec’s national identity and interests takes precedence over other considerations continue to support the Bloc, albeit with reservations both about its sovereigntist bona fides and its social democratic credentials. It is worth noting that there is now also a current that identifies itself as left and stands against austerity and inequality and for a robust welfare state, environmental protection and feminism, among other traditionally left-wing themes, but espouses a right-wing nativist outlook. Its manifesto, “L’Aut’gauche” (the Other Left), accuses the urban, cosmopolitan, inclusive left of capitulating to multiculturalism and minorities that threaten to extinguish Québec’s distinct identity. The manifesto’s authors endorsed the Bloc.

Among those who find the Bloc’s ethnic nationalism unpalatable there was some lingering support for the NDP and also for the federal Green Party, which benefited from the burgeoning environmental movement in Québec to raise its profile there. (It was the Green Party that suffered most severely from the distortions of the first-past-the-post system, winning only three seats, two in British Columbia and one in New Brunswick, despite having garnered 6.5 per cent of the national popular vote).

The Unions

Although the NDP was cofounded by the labour movement and the party’s constitution affords unions a special role, the union movement proved largely noncommittal in this election. Canada’s largest union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, endorsed the NDP, as it has done since the 1960s, and so did the Ontario Federation of Labour and the United Steelworkers, which ran a series of radio and TV ads exposing the Liberals’ broken promises to Indigenous communities. Several key unions, such as UNIFOR and the Public Service Alliance of Canada, called for strategic voting to prevent a Conservative victory, while others, including Québec’s major unions, the Conseil des syndicats nationaux and the Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec, chose to identify priority issues without issuing any *mot d’ordre* to members.

While the NDP platform had the merit of emphasizing the need to invest in creating hundreds of thousands of new jobs in areas such as retrofitting buildings, renewable energy and transportation as part of a just transition away from fossil fuels, some critics pointed out that on key labour issues, such as regulating precarious employment to ensure equal pay for equal work, the NDP failed to

distinguish itself from the Liberals. They noted that the party's platform fell well short of the bold vision for labour put forward by Bernie Sanders in the United States.

The Climate Emergency

If a single issue can be said to have dominated the 2019 election, it was climate change. The campaign happened to coincide with the global climate strikes in September that saw millions take to the streets all over the world. In fact, four of the six party leaders in Canada took part in the demonstrations; three of them, including Justin Trudeau, joined the massive rally in Montreal, where climate activist Greta Thunberg spoke, and some 500,000 people were estimated to have participated. Critics had a field day with the sight of Trudeau marching in the climate strike, essentially protesting his own government's inaction.

Conservative leader Andrew Scheer was, unsurprisingly, missing in action that day. Moreover, the party declined to participate in a planned national climate debate, prompting the organizers to cancel the event. Climate change is not a preoccupation of the Conservative voters although the Party pays lip service to anthropogenic climate change as a serious matter. In fact, the majority of Conservatives holding office in Canada are denialists in all but name, determined to thwart even mild mitigation efforts. Their platform minimizes Canada's contribution to the climate crisis by emphasizing the country's relatively small share of greenhouse gas emissions in absolute terms and ignoring the damning per capita emissions which make Canada the worst offender of all G20 countries. While promising to tackle climate change by obliging large greenhouse gas emitters to invest in technological innovation to make Canada's oil and gas sector "the cleanest in the world," the Conservatives' primary aim is to build a pan-Canadian energy corridor, an enterprise characterized by Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood as a "megalomaniac pipe dream." Apart from vowing to scrap Liberal plans for a new clean fuel standard, the centrepiece of their campaign was a promise to repeal the Liberals' revenue-neutral carbon tax (and remove other perceived impediments to the free hand of fossil capitalism), while deliberately deceiving voters about its cost to the majority of Canadians (a rebate system ensures that 90 per cent of the revenue raised is returned to taxpayers, with the result that most Canadians stand to make money in the bargain).

Both before and during the election campaign, an inordinate amount of attention was devoted to this market-based mechanism focused on individual consumer behaviour – a tax which experts concur is far too low, even factoring in the scheduled increase from the current \$20 per tonne to \$50 per tonne in 2022, to enable Canada to meet its Paris Agreement target of cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 30 per cent (relative to 2005 levels). The carbon tax allows the oil and gas industry to appear to be cooperating in the fight against climate change while avoiding the direct regulation of its activities and the far-reaching measures, such as drastically limiting fossil fuel extraction, which might actually slow the pace of planetary warming. (According to the federal Natural Resources department, the oil and gas sector is one of Canada's largest GHG emitters and tar sands production led to a 23 per cent increase in emissions between 2005 and 2017). In the meantime, the cost to corporations is offset by subsidies to the tune of \$3.3 billion annually, according to estimates. Ending subsidies was yet another unfulfilled Liberal promise.

Trudeau's sincerity in combating climate change was an easy target for the NDP and the Greens, most particularly in light of his August 2018 decision to pay the Kinder Morgan company \$4.5 bil-

lion in taxpayers' money for the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion project. This pipeline destined to transport dirty tar sands oil from landlocked Alberta to British Columbia, where it would be exported to Asia by tanker. The purchase was made in spite of opposition to the project by the B.C. government, many Indigenous groups, most environmentalists and thousands of citizens across the country deeply worried about the adverse ecological impact and risks associated with the project. Bill McKibben called Trudeau "a disaster for the planet" for telling a group of oil executives in Texas that: "no country would find 173bn barrels of oil in the ground and just leave them there." The Trans Mountain project was given the green light in June 2019 just after the Liberals introduced a non-binding motion declaring a national climate emergency, which was also supported by the NDP, the Bloc Québécois and the Green Party. And while those three parties oppose the pipeline, one of Trudeau's first gestures upon being re-elected on October 21 was to extend an olive branch to the Conservative Party by promising to proceed with Trans Mountain, in an obvious bid to quell the growing alienation of the western provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Thus, while there is a genuine popular will, expressed by a large swath of the citizenry and especially young people, for Canada to take meaningful action to limit climate change, the Liberal minority government will continue to tinker around the edges, virtually guaranteeing Canada's failure to meet its self-determined climate targets under the Paris Agreement, let alone achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, a new Liberal commitment undertaken by Trudeau during the campaign.

The NDP, the Green Party and the Bloc Québécois all have some well-thought-out proposals for limiting carbon emissions, but none untangle the Gordian knot of the Canadian economy's addiction to oil and gas and the industry that produces them. No political party vying for a seat at the parliamentary table is prepared to acknowledge, much less confront, Canadian voters with the kind of immediate and far-reaching transformation of the economy – including the substantial downscaling of production and consumption that would prove lethal to capitalism – required to slow the pace of global warming and stem the tide of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation that threatens the health, safety and survival of billions of people across the globe.

The Controversy Around Québec's Bill 21

Racism and discrimination came to the fore in the 2019 campaign in several ways: from calling out Canada's failure to implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the scandalous ongoing lack of access to clean water in Indigenous communities to the shameful photos that surfaced of a young(er) Justin Trudeau in blackface, which earned the Prime Minister international opprobrium.

One topic that commanded considerable attention and which offers a window on some of the fault lines in Canadian politics was a discriminatory piece of legislation passed by Québec's provincial government in June 2019. The most notorious section of which prohibits various categories of public sector employees deemed to be in positions of authority from wearing religious symbols while at work. It was generally perceived as targeting Muslim women who wear one or another type of headscarf, but it affects other religious minorities who wear visible symbols of their faith as well.

To avert any challenge to the law as unconstitutional under Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Québec government invoked the "notwithstanding clause," a section in the Charter itself that allows provinces to enact legislation for a (renewable) five-year period that is in at variance with rights and freedoms guaranteed under the Charter.

There is a substantial amount of support for the so-called secularism (*laïcité*) law in Québec and polls show that about 40 per cent of people in English Canada are also favourable to a ban on religious symbols. But the legislation has been condemned by a vocal minority in Québec and by observers in Canada and abroad. The discriminatory character of the law was underscored during the campaign by the fact that NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, who wears a turban, would be barred in Québec from serving as a judge, a public school teacher or a wildlife officer.

The subject of Bill 21 was raised often in the media and in the leaders' debates, and candidates were asked what action they would take to protect human rights from being infringed. All four pan-Canadian parties stood to alienate voters in Québec were they seen to consider meddling in the province's affairs. In fact, as astute observers have noted, for many Québécois, beyond its content, the legislation has become a symbol of Québec's autonomy. And like his father before him, Trudeau proved a symbol of the Canadian domination when he remarked that he would not rule out the possibility of the federal government supporting a court challenge to the law at some future date. The Conservatives (whose supporters nationwide approve of the ban), the NDP and the Greens all agreed that although they opposed such a law, they would not challenge Québec's legislative jurisdiction. Meanwhile, the Bloc Québécois, whose voters almost unanimously agree with the ban on religious symbols, seized every opportunity to play up its categorical support for Bill 21, insisting all the while that because it is a strictly provincial matter it should be out of bounds for discussion in the federal campaign.

The People's Party: A Far-Right Flash in the Pan?

Canada has not been immune to the global rise of virulent right-wing populism and that toxic trend made headway during the election campaign. This was apparent in the Conservative Party's pandering to the prejudices and fears of its largely older, white voter base, with such nativist proposals as slashing foreign aid. It also reared its head in the emergence of a far-right splinter party, the People's Party of Canada. The People's Party ran on an anti-immigration, climate denialist, and economically libertarian platform. The extremist views that had hitherto been contained within the Conservative Party found an independent expression. Despite this, the upstart party never threatened to split the right-wing vote and Maxime Bernier was roundly defeated in his own riding, while his party garnered less than two per cent of the vote.

Nevertheless, one of the low points of the 2019 election was the undue attention paid by the mainstream media to the fledgling People's Party and its leader Maxime Bernier. Bernier, a former Conservative MP from Québec and a member of Stephen Harper's cabinet, resigned to launch the party after Andrew Scheer narrowly defeated his bid for the Conservative leadership. The party's platform is beyond the pale on most issues of consequence, reflecting Bernier's twisted worldview. It celebrates higher levels of CO₂ emissions as beneficial for agriculture and calls for Canada's withdrawal from the Paris agreements, the abolition of the carbon tax and an end to subsidies for green technologies. During the campaign, "Mad Max," as Bernier was dubbed, added his venom to the tailings pond of populist rage directed at Swedish teen climate activist Greta Thunberg and tweeted, "The goal of the green Left is to radically transform our society through hysterical fear that the end of the world is coming and we have no choice but to give up our freedoms and way of life." In addition, the party's main hallmark was rabble-rousing on immigration. For Bernier, slashing immigration levels is the solution to everything from affordable housing to social harmony.

While there have always been far-right fringe parties in Canada, they have never been treated by the media as legitimate participants in the electoral process. That changed during this campaign, with mainstream media contributing to normalize the party's xenophobic discourse and open hostility to the scientific consensus on climate change. Even as reports surfaced of organizers and candidates having ties to Islamophobic nativist groups like Pegida Canada, and even neo-Nazi groups the press kept reporting them as if they were any other party. Journalists referred to the People's Party as one of Canada's main federal parties even though it consistently polled at less than three percent of popular support. Although Green Party leader Elizabeth May was excluded from the televised leadership debates in 2008 and 2011, Bernier was quickly welcomed into the fray, conferring on him undue credibility, and People's Party candidates were treated with deference by journalists even as a groundswell of popular anger over the party's "Say No to mass immigration" billboards convinced the advertising company to take the offensive signs down.

In the wake of the party's demolition at the polls, the corporate media declared the People's Party dead and smugly pronounced Canada barren soil for the propagation of the far-right. But in light of the documented proliferation of small far-right groups across the country and acts of extreme violence like the 2017 Québec City mosque shooting, it remains to be seen whether those death notices bespeak denial of a different kind. The notion that Canada and Québec are somehow insulated from the blight of far-right populism now disfiguring the political landscape across the global North is a dangerous illusion. Neoliberal capitalism's crisis of legitimacy creates fodder for demagogues and authoritarianism everywhere. With Doug Ford in power in Ontario and Jason Kenney in Alberta, we have no grounds for complacency, and one of the foremost tasks of the left in Canada and Québec must be to act in concert to offer a viable alternative to the blandishments of the right.

Toward a New Alliance

In the aftermath of the election there are many ideas being aired about which way the left should go from here, but two things seem certain. First, investing in electoral politics, at least at the federal level, will continue to yield limited gains, especially in the absence of electoral reform. Second, we cannot go far without supporting the struggles of Indigenous communities in an attempt to create a coherent countervailing movement in Canada. With climate chaos descending, the natural world receding daily and the tide of reaction rising, the stakes could not be any higher. To borrow a disturbing image from Leo Panitch, we can't rule out the possibility that we may have to build socialism in a world that looks like Blade Runner. But in the meantime, whether we speak French, English or Cree, we have a shared interest in trying to break the stranglehold of the fossil fuel industry and ensuring a socially just adaptation to climate change. Given the limits of renewable energy, a reduction in energy needs is not only necessary and inevitable but must be equitable. How can we redistribute wealth internally and also do our share globally as a wealthy country, for instance by assisting climate refugees? These are tough questions, so while the left needs to continue to work in and alongside social movements to advance concrete and winnable demands, we also need a vision that goes beyond immediate and disparate struggles and develop it together from coast-to-coast-to-coast, on the basis of mutual recognition of our ecological and economic interdependency and respective claims to sovereignty.

Published by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung—New York Office, October 2019.

Executive Director: Andreas Günther
Address: 275 Madison Avenue, Suite 2114, New York, NY 10016
Email: info.nyc@rosalux.org; Phone: +1 (917) 409-1040

With support from the German Foreign Office.

The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation is an internationally operating, progressive non-profit institution for civic education. In cooperation with many organizations around the globe, it works on democratic and social participation, empowerment of disadvantaged groups, alternatives for economic and social development, and peaceful conflict resolution.

The New York Office serves two major tasks: to work around issues concerning the United Nations and to engage in dialogue with North American progressives in universities, unions, social movements, and politics.

www.rosalux-nyc.org