

New Democratic Party of Canada: struggle for power during the parliamentary elections of 1984, 1988 and 2011

Andrey N. Komarov

*Department of World History, Institute for History and Archives,
Russian State University for the Humanities, Russian Federation*

Abstract

Komarov, Andrey N. 2018. New Democratic party of Canada: struggle for power during the parliamentary elections of 1984, 1988, 2011. *Asian Journal of Canadian Studies*, 24-2. 5-16. This paper is to conduct a historical study of NDP struggle for power in Canada during the parliamentary elections of 1984, 1988 and 2011 under the leadership of Ed Broadbent and Jack Layton. The author finalizes the political activity of Ed Broadbent and Jack Layton during the parliamentary elections as well as their participation in the French and English debates. The author comes to the conclusion that, despite all the efforts of the best party leaders in the NDP history Ed Broadbent and Jack Layton, at the nation-wide Canadian political level, there is still a two-party system of Canada, based on the Liberals and the Conservatives. The author of the paper underlines that, unfortunately, the ideas of social democracy are not shared by the majority of voters in Canada. To the author's point of view, social democracy in Canada as a political ideology is perceived by the Canadian electorate as a radical political movement, which does not meet the interests of a large part of the Canadian voters. Of course, the author's opinion on this issue is debatable.

Keywords: *New Democratic Party, Ed Broadbent, Jack Layton,
parliamentary elections, party leaders*

At the national political level, Canada has a classical two — party system of the Anglo-Saxon type, with one party in power and the other in opposition. It should be noted that this trend is consistently stable throughout the development of the Canadian state from 1867. National preferences of Canadian voters are as follows, that they do not allow to come to power from the second half of the XIX century none of the other political parties, except the Liberals and the Progressive Conservatives, and since 2003- the Conservatives. Even at the most difficult moments of the Canadian contemporary history, after the crucial defeat of the Conservatives in parliamentary elections of 1993, the voters during the parliamentary elections of 1993, 1997, 2000 and 2004, voted for the Liberal party under the leadership of Jean Chretien and Paul Martin, not trusting the right-wing Reform Party as well the Canadian Conservative Alliance of Reforms under the leadership of Preston Manning and Stockwell Day.

In fact, the Canadian voters prefer a peaceful and evolutionary way of development of Canada, without revolutions and uprisings. It is this way of social development that they associate from the second half of the XIX century exclusively with the political practice of the Conservatives and the Liberals. In addition, it should be noted that in Canada at the national level the social-democratic ideas are not sufficiently adopted.

The results of the last parliamentary elections in 2015 demonstrated that the NDP (New Democratic party), despite all the efforts of Jack Layton, failed to come to power on a national scale. It did not become a real political alternative to the Conservatives and the Liberals (Pammett, 2016). Received 19.71 percent of the vote and 44 seats in the house of Commons, the New Democrats have returned to the results of the parliamentary elections of 1984 and 1988, when, under the leadership of Ed Broadbent, they were able to get 18% of the vote and 30 seats in the house of Commons in 1984, and 20% of the votes and 43 seats in the house of Commons in 1988 (Frizzell, 1989). The New Democrats also failed to develop their previous success in the 2011 parliamentary elections, when led by Jack Layton, they managed to get 30.6% of the vote and 103 seats in the house of Commons (Pammett, 2011).

Actually it should be noted that the New Democratic Party, which has been in existence in the political system of Canada since 1961, remains the party of the constant opposition, despite the efforts made by Ed Broadbent and Jack Layton – the best leaders in the history of the party.

But what is the reason for this? Why it happens so? We study this issue, making the analysis of the political activity of Ed Broadbent and Jack Layton during the parliamentary elections of 1984, 1988 and 2011.

Ed Broadbent and the parliamentary elections of 1984, 1988 in Canada

Ed Broadbent was the leader of the New Democratic Party from the 7^{of} July 1975 till the December, 4th, 1989. During the leadership of Broadbent, the NDP was preparing to come to power on a national scale twice, in 1984 and 1988. Participating in the English TV debate before the parliamentary elections of 1984, the leader of the NDP, speaking to the audience, called John Turner and Brian Mulroney "Bobbsey twins of Bay Street", arguing that there was no difference between the Liberals and the Tories (Levitt, 1996, 128). The NDP TV video was called "Twins from Bay street" according to Broadbent's statement that the two leading parties are in fact no different from each other, in comparison with the New Democrats, who really represent the best alternative. The key idea of the advertisement was to show an ordinary Canadian family, and a mother looking at her children, and saying them the following: "You need to have someone in Ottawa on our side", which meant, of course, that such people will be from the NDP (Wearing, 1988, 133). But Mulroney responded to Broadbent that there is a clear difference between two political parties, because the Conservatives are ready to govern the country and have a detailed agenda how to do this (Morton, 1986). In fact, Mulroney presented his famous election manifesto – "Where I Stand", in which he appealed to neoconservative

strategy (Mulroney, 1983).

Later on the NDP entered the election campaign in 1988 with a significant reassessment of its forces and capabilities. This was rapidly demonstrated during the TV debates in French and English, when, contrary to the forecasts of analysts, Broadbent lost to Turner and Mulroney. The leader of the NDP failed to offer anything new and interesting to the voter, occasionally getting involved in the discussion between Turner and Mulroney on the issue of the role of the free trade agreement with the United States for the country as a whole. Being very tired after the TV debate in French, which he knew far worse than his opponents, he also looked unconvincing during the debate in English. As A. Frizzel have emphasized on this occasion: "... the previous four years of the NDP's successful activity in the Parliament were crossed out by one minute of the television broadcast, which was unsuccessful for Broadbent." (Frizzell, 1989, 19). Due to the unconvincing speech of the leader of the NDP in the TV debate, the rating of his party began to decline rapidly, reaching only 22% in early November 1988. Having spent three million of Canadian dollars on the advertising campaign of the NDP, the New Democrats have focused on the personality of their leader, experienced and professional policy, from their point of view. This, in their opinion, should have led to the victory of the NDP in the general elections of 1988, or at least to the second

place. However, Broadbent was unable to demonstrate his skills as a professional politician, losing during the election campaign to both the Liberals and the Conservatives.

Jack Layton and the parliamentary elections of 2011 in Canada

The new NDP leader (January 25, 2003 – August 22, 2011) Jack Layton before the parliamentary elections of 2011 was criticized by the prime minister Steven Harper. As the political unprofessionalism of the Liberal party leader M. Ignatiev was more and more affected and the popularity of the NDP at the national level grew, it became fundamentally important for the conservative leader to criticize the new Democrats (Harper Rebuffs Talk of Government 'Hypotheticals', 2011). Without going into complex discussions about the future of the country, the conservative leader tried to interest voters of the country as clear as possible agenda related to the provision of social guarantees.

Speaking in the province of Ontario, Harper urged voters to vote for him, stressing that in the case of coming to power, the NDP will cause irreparable damage to the economy, raise taxes, and provide even more significant budget deficit. The conservative leader stressed that the election platform of the NDP is nothing more than populist, and does not represent the present program of the

future ruling party. Harper stressed that even hypothetically he does not want to imagine the option in which the NDP will win the upcoming elections. Addressing the voters, the conservative leader emphasized that they should really decide whether they want a conservative majority in the Parliament, or a government of new Democrats that will stop the stable economic development of the country, and will cause irreparable harm to Canadians. Illustrating this, the conservative leader drew the attention of the electorate to the political activities of the extremely unpopular government of the new Democrats, who were in power in Ontario in the early 90-s. The same line of criticism of the New Democrats was continued by the leader of the conservatives and during his speeches in Quebec, where he, trying to win the votes of the Quebec voters, proved to them that the Conservative party of Canada, of course, stabilizes the economic situation, while the NDP, without having political experience in running the country, will necessarily raise taxes and create a destructive situation in the province and the state as well (Quebec: Election Battleground, 2011). His speeches in Québec were particularly important in the light of the fact that in the second half of the election campaign the Bloc Québécois and the Liberal party began to rapidly lose its popularity in the French-speaking province, while the NDP, due to Layton, his regular speeches on the French-Canadian issue and the political weakness of the Liberals, on the contrary, began to acquire it (Surging NDP Support Changes

Campaign Dynamics, 2011). In addition, the Conservative leader stressed that he, unlike the new Democrats, is not going to waste time on fruitless and complex discussions on the French-Canadian issue, because the country is currently facing important economic challenges (Quebec's Absence From the Constitution, 2011). Harper's speeches in Quebec were also indicative because, in addition to the short-term period of the general elections of 1984 and 1988, the Conservatives, unlike the Liberals, the Bloc Quebecois and the NDP, were not popular among the electorate of this province.

As a result, the NDP received 30.6% of the vote and 103 seats in the House of Commons, and became Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition. This was achieved thanks to the weak election campaign of the Liberal party leader Michael Ignatiev as well as the political talents of Jack Layton. But in 2015, as was mentioned above, the New Democrats failed to develop their previous success in the 2011 parliamentary elections.

CONCLUSION

What are the reasons for the above-mentioned failures of the NDP? It seems that they are not only due to the fact that the new Democrats can not fully bring the center-left political agenda to the Canadian voters. The global cause of the failures of the New Democrats is the peculiarities of the political culture of Canada. In this

regard, it should be noted that the ideas of social democracy are not shared by the majority of voters in North America. Unfortunately, social democracy in Canada is perceived as a radical political ideology of the development of Canadian society, opposing Liberalism and Conservatism, which does not meet the interests of a large part of the Canadian electorate.

Therefore, certain adjustments to the election programmes of the New Democrats, made by their leaders on the eve of certain parliamentary elections, do not bring proper results. It should be noted that in this regard, the success of the new Democrats in the parliamentary elections of 2011 was a temporary phenomenon, which was explained more by the political unprofessionalism of the previous leader of the Liberal party M. Ignatiev, than by a fundamental breakthrough to the voters of the Canadian socialists.

In this regard, it is interesting that Canada, as a former British colony, has been more committed to the conservative-liberal ideology than the former metropolis – Great Britain. If in the United Kingdom the political elites, and, above all, Conservatives, agreed to the transfer of power in 1924 to the Labour party, and thus contributed to the formation of the First Labour government of MacDonald, and then reacted favorably to the presence in power of the Second Labour government of McDonald in 1929-1931, in Canada the situation was exactly the opposite. In the post-war period, the new Democrats were

rather perceived as the third opposition political force, which is not a real national alternative.

Therefore, summing up the principles of social democracy in relation to the Canadian realities, it should be noted that, unfortunately, they are not supported by the majority of voters on a national scale, who opt for the Conservatives or the Liberals. The deep fear of any even minor turn to the principles of social democracy associated with instability, radical changes, etc., determines the political preferences of the Canadian voters, at the national level, associated exclusively with the Conservatives or the Liberals.

On the contrary, at the provincial level, the situation is fundamentally different. In some regions of the Canadian Federation, the role of NDP, which meet the regional specifics and preferences of voters, is great. For example, Ontario is a unique example of three-party system, where in 80-90-ies of XX century the New Democrats, the Liberals and the Conservatives have consistently succeeded each other in power (Rae, 1996). At the provincial level, the preferences of the Canadian electorate come from support in Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan for three major parties - the Conservative, Liberal, and the New Democratic as well. Despite the presence of representatives from other political parties in the provincial parliaments, it was these three parties that consistently came to power in the above-mentioned provinces. And in Manitoba, British

Columbia, Saskatchewan, the New Democratic party has been ruling repeatedly since the 70's of the XX century. It is significant that in British Columbia the new Democrats were in power both from 1971 to 1975 and from 1991 to 2001, competing primarily with the Liberal party of the province. In 2015, the Conservatives of Alberta lost the provincial elections to the New Democratic party of the province, led by R. Notley.

REFERENCES

- Frizzell A., Pammet J. H., Westell A. (1989). *The Canadian General Election of 1988*. Ottawa: Carleton University Press.
- Harper Rebuffs Talk of Government 'Hypotheticals' (2011)
<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canadavotes2011/story/2011/04/30/cv-election-saturday-campaign.html>
- Levitt J. (1996). *Fighting Back for Jobs and Justice*. Ed Broadbent in Parliament. Ottawa: LLA Publishing, 128.
- Mulroney B. (1983). *Where I Stand*. Toronto. McClelland and Stewart.
- Morton D. (1986). *New Democrats, 1961-1986: The Politics of Change*. Toronto. McClelland and Stewart.
- Pammet J.H., Dornan C. (2011). *The Canadian Federal Election of 2011*. Toronto: Dundurn Press.
- Pammet J.H., Dornan C. (2016). *The Canadian Federal Election of 2015*. Toronto: Dundurn Press.

- Rae B. (1996). *From Protest to Power. Personal Reflections on a Life in Politics*. Toronto: Penguin Books Canada Ltd.
- Surging NDP Support Changes Campaign Dynamics (2011)
<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canadavotes2011/story/2011/04/21/cv-election-ndp-quebec-803.html>
- Wearing J. (1988). *Strained Relations: Parties and Voters*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 133

Manuscript received September 14, 2018
Accepted December 2, 2018
Published December 31, 2018