

What Bernie Sanders can teach the NDP

This guest editorial appeared in the Saskatoon Star-Phoenix and may be cited as: Robertson, L. H. (2016, May 16). What Bernie Sanders can teach the NDP. *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, p. A6.

Have you noticed that when Bernie Sanders describes himself as a democratic socialist the media put the phrase in quotation marks? They don't know what that is or they disagree with the designation, but they offer no explanation. The Canadian media are not more enlightened. We had a federal election where the Liberals were described as "left wing" having snatched the PM's job from an outflanked Tom Mulcair. While Mulcair was indeed outflanked, to call the Liberals "left wing" is to assume the political spectrum stops there.

Notions of political "right" and "left" began with France's 18th century national assembly. To prevent fist fights between honorable parliamentarians the monarchists, clericalists and other conservatives were made to sit to the right of the president while the socialists, democrats and republicans sat on the left. Since then, those who conservatively want to maintain the status quo or, in reaction to change, turn the clock back to an imagined better time are metaphorically on the right. Those who want to change society according to some utopian vision sit on the left.

The NDP has been slowly shifting right ever since Tommy Douglas defeated Hazen Argue to become its first leader. Argue crossed the floor stating, "If I'm going to join the Liberals it will be through the front door." In the last federal election the NDP, running on a platform of a national child care program and no-deficit would have been outflanked by the Joe Clark Conservatives.

Sanders is a throwback to a time when leading Jewish intellectuals like Adler, Einstein, Arendt, Luxemburg and Marx were secular and politically left-wing. The emancipation of Jewish people would be accomplished by uniting with other workers in building a classless society. Hitler's holocaust gave impetus to a competing, more reactionary, vision of a Zionist homeland. In keeping with a left perspective, Sanders was critical of Israel's 2014 invasion of Gaza calling it "disproportionate." Given the vetting of candidates who expressed sympathy for Palestinians prior to the 2015 election, it is doubtful that Sanders would have been allowed to run for the NDP in Canada.

Sanders received support in the Muslim community. Pakistani born Canadian and former Humanist of the Year, Khalid Sohail, estimates that a fifth of the world's Muslims are modernists who, if pressed to interpret the Koran, do so in metaphorical and allegorical ways consistent with multicultural harmony. Another fifth are orthodox fundamentalists who take a literalist and sometimes violent view. The majority could swing to either side dependent on social and political conditions. For example, the second U.S. invasion of Iraq (which Sanders opposed) resulted in a large number of Sunni Muslims joining Islamic State. According to the definitions created prior to the French Revolution, the reactionaries who wish to turn the clock back to an imagined (in this case Medieval) better time are right-wing, while those who wish to create an imagined better future based on secular values are left-wing.

In its half century of rightward drift, the NDP replaced calls for the end of capitalism with promises to provide redress groups of victims. Early democratic socialists thought capitalism could not accommodate such measures. They were wrong. Almost immediately laws were passed making discrimination on the basis of sex, race and other proscribed areas, illegal. Funding was allocated to such groups for education, targeted job creation, language retention, legal costs, and organizational expenses. The victim groups who were gaining privileges within the existing economic system had less interest in changing that system. In such a dynamic, alliances with politicians who are well connected to the "one percent," know Wall Street and have the support of the political establishment might be advantageous. In the U.S. blacks largely voted against Sanders, a man who had marched with Martin Luther King, in favour of Hillary Clinton. In Canada such special interest groups voted en masse for the Liberals. The lesson for New Democrats is waffle left or face irrelevance.