

Making the links

The vital need for a united left

Radical Randy

"The whole idea of the Left is just so *gauche*." The words of one activist I know sadly epitomize the world view of many. It seems fashionable among some participants at progressive conferences to dismiss the existence of or need for a unified Left. This apparently indicates that the speaker or questioner, having transcended petty political considerations, is above ideological squabbling in their search for pragmatic solutions. Very post-post-modern or something. *Tres chic. Tres suicidal.*

The need for a basic, widely held, all-encompassing theory of the Left can be seen when examining the alternative. Without this unity of purpose, the social justice, peace, environmental, and other struggles degenerate into a series of atomized single-issue campaigns, a futile cycle of reacting to problems by putting out fires and battling apparently random opponents. Moreover, it makes it easier for right-wing interests to pick off public programs or services one at a time, as if they were isolated entities.

If any threat were needed to galvanize solidarity among the Left and social justice groups in Canada, the Harper majority should have more than sufficed. Under the pretence of safeguarding the economy, Prime Minister Harper's ideologically driven 2012 omnibus budget slashed spending on federal programs and attacked non-governmental organizations, with environmental monitoring and protection singled out for a particular bashing.

Only the terminally naive could believe these are all just separate, unrelated spending cuts. This budget is just one component in the neoconservatives' agenda to "transform" Canada by dismantling any programs that might benefit the public rather than big business. Meanwhile, Alberta's Redford government, in the venerable Ralph Klein Conservative tradition, pleads revenue shortfalls with predictable consequences for provincial programs. All with abysmally low rates of oil and gas royalties and rock bottom flat taxes for the wealthy. Failure to identify and unite resistance to these policies as part of a larger whole seriously impairs the struggle for a better, more just world. It is necessary to look beneath the surface at the underlying root cause of these problems in order to have any kind of effective solution.

"What's in a name?"

Shakespeare had a point. Those wishing to ridicule the Left/Right paradigm frequently dredge up the origins of these terms in France's Estates-General assembly, where the conservative nobility sat on the king's right-hand side, while the radical reformers sat on his left. This is then held up as proof of how anachronistic the whole concept is and the need for a less divisive, more cooperative approach to economic and political issues.

Others may criticize the Left/Right dichotomy as a simplistic limiting linear approach to politics and society. The important point, as we shall see, is to recognize that there is a grouping of Left positions, not just random, isolated issues. If some progressives find the term "Left" unhelpful, call it something else. Social and economic justice by any other name would smell as sweet.

The dismissal of any need for a unified left, either ideologically or strategically, by some progressives suggests a fundamental inability to apprehend the nature of their struggles. They may believe they are up against a neutral, non-directed economic force of nature, one with neither malice nor an agenda. In this view poverty, war, or pollution are just the unfortunate consequences of a lack of proper planning, analysis, or communication and can be solved on their own with a bit of goodwill, understanding, and compromise on all sides.

In reality, this just leads to piecemeal hodgepodge fights by amorphous *ad hoc* groups grappling with the same issues over and over. The failure to see the need for a coherent unifying theory of the Left and for a unified front reveals a failure to appreciate the nature of the Right and the decades-long assault it has waged. Ultimately we are all fighting the same foe. The forces behind corporate supremacy seem to be in charge whether the focus is on U.S. backed wars, environmental pillaging, or growing inequality within and between nations.

Corporate fightback

The rise of the social justice, anti-war, and environmental movements in the West in the 1960s horrified the economic and political elites. In 1971, in response, future U.S. Supreme Court justice Lewis Powell sent a memorandum to the Director of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce advocating that corporate America become more active in moulding their country's politics and laws. This launched the corporate counter-offensive we in the West are still being subjected to today, including the creation of right-wing corporate-funded "think tanks" such as the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, and the Manhattan Institute. A major role of these organizations has been the reshaping of public opinion to accept the damaging economic and social policies being thrust upon them by plutocrats. The same developments have been paralleled in Canada.

Neoliberalism, the fundamental economic agenda of the Right, has been a powerful unifying ideological umbrella for those seeking to advance inequality in our society. This post-war ideology equates unfettered capitalist greed with freedom and liberty. It promotes deregulation, union-busting, privatization, tax cuts for the rich and corporations, and globalization with the outsourcing of manufacturing to overseas sweatshops. This was fronted with the claim that workers as well as owners would benefit from the trickle-down of the resulting fountain of riches when the market was freed to work its magic. Additionally, its neoconservative adherents call for the U.S. military to be used to prop up the American Empire as it advances these interests globally.

With neoliberalism as their guiding light it becomes apparent that, regardless of the particular political issue being presented by the Right, powerful undercurrents furthering the wealth and power of big business and the elites are usually to be found.

The Right has many additional structural advantages with which to push its neoliberal agenda. Organizations like Canadian Council of Chief Executives and the Business Roundtable in the U.S., as well as various trade groups, link CEOs to promote shared corporate interests. The incestuous relationship between politicians and business leaders is on display at globalization events such as the annual World Economic Forum meetings between world leaders and the heads of the planet's thousand largest corporations.

Additionally, mass media largely consists of corporate media conglomerates financed by corporate advertising and promoting corporate interests and values. Thus, the right has a unifying neoliberal ideology and mission, the organizational structure to reach consensus, control over government and media, and massive financial clout to push these policies no matter how damaging they are to the public interest, environment, or future generations. It therefore seems the height of folly to suggest that no corresponding need exists for a unified Left, with a mirroring unified vision and organization.

Deal breakers

Governments and corporate media frequently attempt to drive a wedge between the various activist groups by casting those engaging in or advocating peaceful civil disobedience as "radicals" in an attempt to alienate more mainstream protestors from them as well as to frighten the public. Additionally, minor concessions may be made by the elites to mollify and co-opt the moderates. This can produce division in the Left just when unity is most critical.

Perhaps the biggest problem stymieing Left solidarity is the conflict between labour and environmental groups. Naturally, workers and unions want well-paying jobs but is it worthwhile for society as a whole to have a few decades of employment in return for a virtual eternity of a blighted, polluted environment? American author Upton Sinclair observed that "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it." This certainly applies to tar sands CEOs downplaying environmental damage, but also to their employees trying to earn a paycheck. One solution to this split may be the green jobs in renewable energy promoted by environmentalists, but these are unlikely to equal the wages provided by feeding America's oil addiction. Of course, in a fair economy, the artificial pitting of workers against the environment, or each other, would not be an issue.

Even those interests in potential conflict such as labour and environment may find common ground for tactical alliances. TransCanada's proposed Keystone XL pipeline to Texas and Enbridge's Northern Gateway pipeline to British Columbia would result in loss of potential union refining jobs and economic value-added benefits due to the export of raw bitumen. All this so oil companies can inflate their already bloated profits using

cheap labour. Environmentalists and unions can both agree to oppose such pipelines (if for different reasons) providing some common ground.

Introducing: the real media

The corporate control over mass media is perhaps the most daunting hurdle for the Left but paradoxically, it may be an opportunity to enhance Left unity. Stephen Harper knows he can count on Canadian corporate media to largely ignore stealthy, incremental administrative cuts to government programs, as well as abandoning Medicare renewal negotiations. This danger could be used as a spur for environmental, labour, poverty, peace, trade campaigners, citizens' groups and other social justice advocates to come together to finance, publicize and operate a national non-partisan, non-commercial alternative news media devoted to these and other issues. This could create a daily half- or full-hour newscast that would present "conventional" as well as activist oriented news stories and documentaries, all viewed from a Left perspective. Instead of the fragmented context-free approach of corporate media, this newscast would make a special point to dig behind the headlines and connect the dots to produce a coherent picture of economic and political stories and trends. Like the American *Democracy Now* program, this could be a webcast, with additional coverage on community television and campus radio stations. The organizational structure and cooperation needed to produce such a daily broadcast as well as the work necessary to resolve the differences of the competing interests involved could serve as a springboard to a more comprehensive alliance among the Left groups involved. Those questioning whether the Left could afford to implement such an undertaking should perhaps better ask if it can afford not to.

Another world is possible

Regardless of their specific programs and ideology, the members of the Left, whether anarchists or reformers, Marxists or democratic socialists, should be able to agree on what they are fighting.

Many on the Left oppose corporations, but even those accepting their existence will agree that domination of the world's economies, governments, and mass media by the corporations and wealthy must end. Also to be eradicated is the absurdity of corporate "personhood" – giving corporations human rights – along with limited shareholder liability giving investors no liability for corporate misdeeds beyond their initial investment. The investment banks and financial institutions of Wall Street and Bay Street, with their financial pyramid schemes, would need to be eliminated. As well, U.S.-led economic, military, and political imperialism to further these interests would be ended.

A significant realization for the Left is the value of decoupling their critique of capitalism, corporate rule, and the American Empire, from whatever varied solutions they may offer. The validity of proffered alternatives (or lack thereof) in no way diminishes the validity of their critiques or makes the Right any less wrong.

A brief glimmer of how Left coalitions may be constructed was found in the Occupy Wall Street movement. Capitalism itself was identified as the fundamental problem to focus on, though approached from a wide variety of possible alternatives. The Occupy protestors showed that a major point of division – ideology – need not be the dividing force it is often seen to be. What really matters are principles and the vision for a fair, just, sustainable society: the kind of Alberta, Canada, and world we want. Ideology should not be fetishized as an end in itself, but rather is the vehicle used to reach an end.

The goal for the Left is a better, more equitable world with a government and economy that serve the people and with human well-being as the centre of the economy. Taxes and social programs would drive wealth redistribution for a much more egalitarian society. Full universal education, medicare, social programs, pensions etc. would be government funded, administered, and delivered without our current privatization or P3 boondoggles. Most on the Left would support small family businesses, co-operatives, and collectives with local sourcing and production wherever possible along with empowered unions and good living wages. Fair trade would replace "free trade" treaties. The major points of contention may be the degree of state ownership or regulation of natural resources, utilities, and industry and the extent, if any, of tightly controlled corporate capitalism to be permitted.

This goal-directed vision of ideological unity should be achieved using the principles and values we treasure. These are primarily a shared sense of community, environmental sustainability (real sustainability, not the empty greenwashing corporate advertising slogans that just allow business as usual), and a fundamental dedication to human rights (which do not include the right to unlimited wealth or property or enshrinement of human rights for corporations).

Additionally, public policy should be determined by full democratic participation, rather than our current plutocracy, and be based on open, fully transparent decision making, with analysis based on fact and science, rather than the present catering to vested financial interests. The specific ideology or blend of ideologies used to achieve the aforementioned goals should follow these principles or be subject to change or be replaced. Ideology must be shaped and revised by reality, not the other way around, as has so often been the case for both the Left and Right.

The danger highlighted by the increasing desperation of a collapsing global capitalist system and growing suppression of dissent make it increasingly imperative that progressive elements unite in informal networks and/or formal structures. We owe the future nothing less.